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An Indian Test of Indian Astrology

Jayant V. Narlikar

In the world of astrology, India has many claims to fame. It has an astrology fundamentally different from both Chinese and Western astrology,¹ possibly more part- and full-time astrologers than in the rest of the world put together, and the world's longest-running English astrological monthly (*The Astrological Magazine* 1895–2007). Its main government funding agency, the University Grants Commission, provides support for BSc and MSc courses in astrology in Indian universities. And as for the general public, one finds almost universal belief in it.

Indian astronomer and astrology critic Balachandra Rao (2000, 149) notes: “The belief in astrology among our masses is so deep that for every trivial decision in their personal lives—like whether to apply for a job or not—they readily rush to the astrologers with their horoscopes.” Likewise, many will consult an astrologer to ensure their marriage date will be auspicious. In 1963, the astrologer's advice, for example, led to a postponement of the wedding of the Crown Prince of Sikkim by a year. A day seen as generally auspicious can thus lead to a large number of weddings taking place, putting severe pressure on facilities like wedding halls, caterers, etc.

Prediction of Events

Western astrologers are generally taught that astrology is nonfatalistic and therefore not a good bet for predicting events. Indian astrologers hold the opposite view, and every astrologer worthy of the name must be able to make such forecasts. Unfortunately, these predictions do not carry any controls. For example, B.V. Raman (1912–1998), publisher-editor of *The Astrological Magazine*, wrote that “when Saturn was in Aries in 1939 England had to declare war against Germany” (note the fatalism) in a work intended “to present a case for astrology” (Raman 1992, 119). However, this reasoning fails to notice that Saturn was also in Aries in 1909 and 1968 when nothing much happened other than overseas state visits by Edward VII and Elizabeth II, respectively.

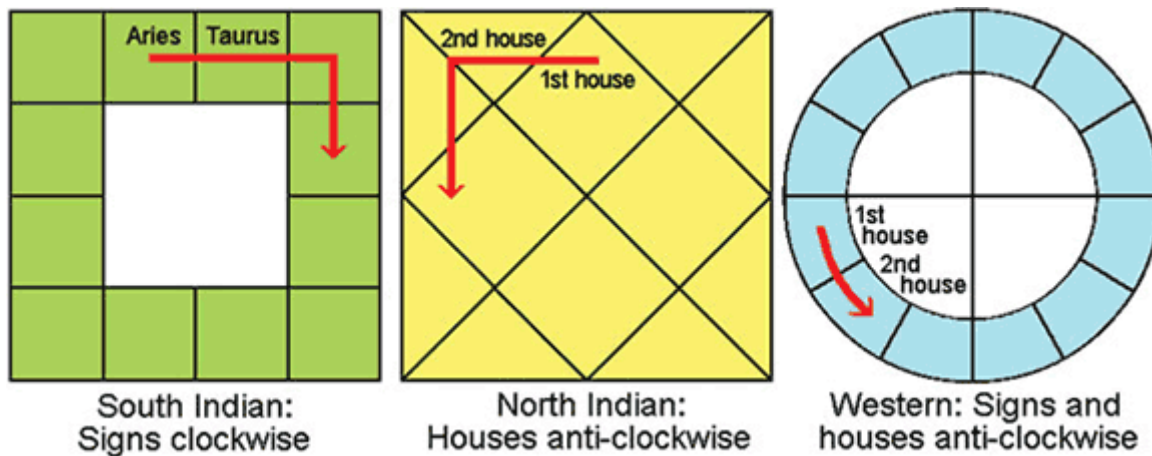
Indian astrologers often make extreme claims about Indian astronomy, as when *The Astrological Magazine* for March 1984 claimed Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto had been discovered around 500 BC (Rao 2000, 36). But their claims about Indian astrology tend to be even more extreme, as in the August 25, 2003, *Indian Express* wherein Raj Baldev, who claimed to be “an authority on the subject of Astronomy, Astrology, Cosmo-Mathematics and Metaphysics” said that ancient Hindu astrology “is a complete science” where even one million billionth of a second “makes a lot of difference.” Skeptics might wonder at this, since it

implies that the shadows cast on ancient sundials were routinely positioned to better accuracy than a hundred millionth of the diameter of an atom. Even at night. Can we believe it?

Complexity without End

Indian astrology is more complex than Western astrology, with countless authoritative aphorisms to cover every possible situation. Indeed, the few Western authors who have described it for Western use have typically required decades of study before proceeding. But as one of them has noted: “This is of course natural for a society over 6,000 years old whose elders have not only employed astrology but embraced it” (Braha 1986, x).²

And there is no Western equivalent to the ways in which those authoritative aphorisms can be modified via suitably chosen amulets, mantras, colors, gemstones (yellow or blue sapphire is said to strengthen Jupiter or Saturn, respectively), and by performing yajnas (a spiritual ceremony involving offerings to fire performed by a Hindu priest). Ironically these modifications specified by the astrologer are essentially fatalistic ways of achieving non-fatalistic outcomes.



Indian horoscopes are a different shape from Western horoscopes, and their signs, houses, and aspects are calculated differently. They also differ in how they are interpreted. A Western-style interpretation focusing on the owner's personality and motivations would be rejected in India, where clients expect fortune-telling.

Miraculous Nadis

Indian Nadi astrology has many variations, but if any of them worked it would be a miracle. Nadi astrologers, when approached by a client, are found to have a huge collection of horoscopes on ancient palm leaves, one of which turns out to be the client's. But a little thinking shows that it is not as miraculous as it may seem. Consider the following scenario.

After providing birth details during the first visit, the client is asked to return a few days later on the pretext that it will take time to find his horoscope among the thousands held by the astrologer. While the client is away, the astrologer, based on the information supplied by the client, writes his or her horoscope on a fresh palm leaf and soaks it in a slurry of coconut kernels and mango bark, both of which are rich in tannin. This gives the palm leaf an ancient look (Premanand et al. 1993, 331). During the second visit the client is appropriately impressed that his/her horoscope turned up after so many centuries.

Electronic Destinies

In 1984, the first companies to offer computerized horoscopes appeared in India, seventeen years after they had started business in Europe. In twenty minutes (today, in just a few seconds) they could do the calculations that previously took three months. A computer horoscope may cost twenty-five rupees (about fifty cents) for an ordinary one and fifty rupees (about \$1) for a longer one, more in big cities or air-conditioned centers. Predictions cost up to 500 rupees depending on the number of years ahead (Rao 2000, 147).³ Many websites offer free horoscopes; see, for example, www.bestindiansites.com/astrology.

As in the West, Indian astrologers immediately complained that the computer was devoid of intuition and experience, and did not meet their clients' need to talk and vent their feelings. Indeed, about two decades ago an educated young man committed suicide after a computer horoscope predicted total failure in everything he did (Premanand et al. 1993, 307). Nevertheless, as in the West, computer horoscopes seem here to stay.

In 1989, I was showing a visitor around my newly established astronomy center in Pune. At that time we had just set up our new computer and I explained its capabilities to the visitor. At the end, I waited for any questions she may have had. Yes, she did have a question: "Does this computer cast horoscopes?"

The Ultimate Accolade

The lobby for Indian astrology had its crowning glory when, in February 2001, the University Grants Commission (UGC) decided to provide funds for BSc and MSc courses in astrology at Indian universities. Its circular stated: "There is urgent need to rejuvenate the science of Vedic Astrology in India . . . and to provide opportunities to get this important science exported to the world." Actually, the phrase *Vedic Astrology* is an oxymoron since the prefix *Vedic* has nothing to do with the Vedas, the ancient and sacred literature of the Hindus, which do not mention astrology. In fact, scholars agree that the usual planetary astrology came to India with the Greeks who had visited India since Alexander's campaign in the third century BC.

Within nine months of the UGC's announcement, forty-five of India's 200 universities had applied for the UGC grants of 1.5 million rupees (about \$30,000) to establish departments of astrology. Of these, twenty were accepted (Siddhanta 2001, 2). To those Indians who believe that astrological considerations influence the course of their business and family lives—and this category involves leaders of major political parties—the UGC's decision might seem sensible if overdue.

But the decision provoked outrage among India's academics, especially those in the science faculties. More than 100 scientists and 300 social scientists wrote in protest to the government. Of the thirty letters-to-the-editor that appeared in the Indian science journal *Current Science*, most of them from scientists in university departments or research institutes, about half dismissed astrology as a pseudoscience, and a quarter felt that decisive tests were needed. Against this, the rest felt there was nothing wrong with funding something that most Indian people believe in. But the protests were without effect because, in Indian law, Vedic astrology is seen as a scientific discipline.

Nevertheless, in 2004, several scientists asked the Andhra Pradesh High Court to stop the UGC from funding courses in Vedic astrology because it was a pseudoscience, it would impose Hindu beliefs on the education system,⁴ and it would reduce the funds available for genuine scientific research. However, the court dismissed their case on the grounds that it was not correct for a court to interfere with a UGC decision that did not violate Indian law.

In 2011, an appeal under the act that bans false advertising was made to the Mumbai High Court. It was dismissed by the court arguing that the act “does not cover astrology and related sciences. Astrology is a trusted science and is being practiced for over 4000 years. . . .” (as reported in *The Times of India* February 3, 2011).

Failed Predictions

To justify calling it a science, astrology must fulfill the basic requirement of a scientific theory—it must make testable and correct predictions. Here the performance of astrology in predicting the results of events has been very poor. The nearest we have are follow-ups to predictions of public events such as elections, where failure is the norm. For example, the elections in 1971 were a showdown between Indira Gandhi and her political opponents. *The Astrological Magazine* was filled with predictions by amateurs and professionals, most of whom predicted that Gandhi would lose. In fact, she won with an overwhelming majority.

The 1980 elections attracted another frenzy of predictions, most of which saw Gandhi losing. For example B.V. Raman (whom I discussed earlier), in a rare departure from his usual vagueness, predicted that Gandhi's efforts to regain office "may misfire. Her ability to influence the Government will be disconcertingly limited in effectiveness" and the outcome "may not see a stable Government." An Indian horary astrologer (one who answers questions) predicted that Gandhi "can never become the Prime Minister." However, she won with a huge majority, was prime minister, and formed a very stable government.

Also in 1980, at a large international conference organized by the Indian Astrologers Federation, both the president and secretary of the Federation predicted a war with Pakistan in 1982, which India would win, and a world war between 1982 and 1984. All wrong! These examples and many more are given by Rao (2000, 113–122), who notes that no astrologer predicted Gandhi's assassination in 1984, and that the golden rule seems to be "predict only those things which please the listener's ego."⁵

Lack of Criticism

In the West, books critical of astrology are not hard to find, but in India the reverse is true. Some excellent books exist, such as Premanand et al. (1993) and Rao (2000), but all are hampered by a lack of Indian tests with which to counter true believers. Even *Current Science* had to wait until Manoj Komath's (2009) review, which drew heavily on Western sources such as the critical but user-friendly www.astrology-and-science.com. Unfortunately, given the low level of income and high level of illiteracy of the masses, web sources may not be very effective in general.

UGC's funding of astrology might have been justifiable had Indian astrology ever been a source of new knowledge (it hadn't; see Siddhanta 2001, 13), or if its modus operandi had been verified by controlled tests. But unlike astrology in the West, where several hundred controlled tests have found no support commensurate with its claims (Dean 2007), astrology in India had hitherto been without controlled tests, even though its focus on predicting yes/no events would make testing easy.⁶ I will now describe a controlled test that my colleagues and I conducted recently.

Our Experiment

Our experiment was performed in the university city of Pune (formerly Poona) about 160 km (100 miles) southeast of Mumbai (formerly Bombay) in the state of Maharashtra, which is the second-largest in population and third-largest in area of India's twenty-five states. Pune itself has a population of about 3.5 million.

For the experiment I was assisted by Professor Sudhakar Kunte from the Department of Statistics at Pune University, Narendra Dabholkar from the Committee for the Eradication of Superstitions, and Prakash Ghatpande a former professional astrologer who has subsequently turned into a critic of astrology.

Indian astrologers claim that they are able to tell intelligence from a person's horoscope. So volunteers from the Committee for the Eradication of Superstitions went to different schools and collected the names of teenage school children rated by their teachers as mentally bright. They also collected names from special schools for the mentally handicapped. The destinies of these cases could hardly be more different, so they were ideal for testing the above claim. From the collected data we selected 100 bright and 100 mentally handicapped cases whose age distribution is shown on the next page.

Birth details were obtained from their parents because birth certificates are rare in India. Professional Indian astrologers routinely assume that birth details provided by parents are correct, so our procedure followed the norm. Each horoscope (birth chart) was calculated by one of us (PG) using commercial astrological software. All horoscopes were coded and stored in safe custody by Professor Kunte at Pune University, so that neither the experimenters (our group of four) nor the astrologers could know the identities of the individuals.

Publicity

We announced our experiment at a press conference in Pune May 12, 2008, and invited practicing astrologers to take part. We explained that each participant would be given forty horoscopes drawn at random from our set of 200 and would have to judge whether their owners were mentally bright or handicapped. We also invited established astrological organizations to take part, for which they would be given all 200 horoscopes, a respectably large sample size.

The press conference, which was reported in almost all local and regional newspapers, proved to be an efficient way to reach astrologers. Within a few days we received about 150 telephone calls from astrologers all over Maharashtra expressing interest. We asked them to send us their names, experience, and method of prediction used, together with a stamped self-addressed envelope for mailing the forty horoscopes. They were then allowed one month for making their judgments. In due course, fifty-one astrologers asked for horoscopes, of which twenty-seven from all over Maharashtra sent back their judgments. The rest did not tell us why they chose not to participate.

Objections

Astrologers from the Pune and Maharashtra astrological societies expressed concern that, because the data had been collected by skeptics, the experiment would be biased. We assured them that the skepticism of data collectors had no active role in running the experiment, and that the experiment was of the double-blind kind to make sure it was entirely fair. But they were not convinced, and tried (unsuccessfully) to dissuade other astrologers from participating.

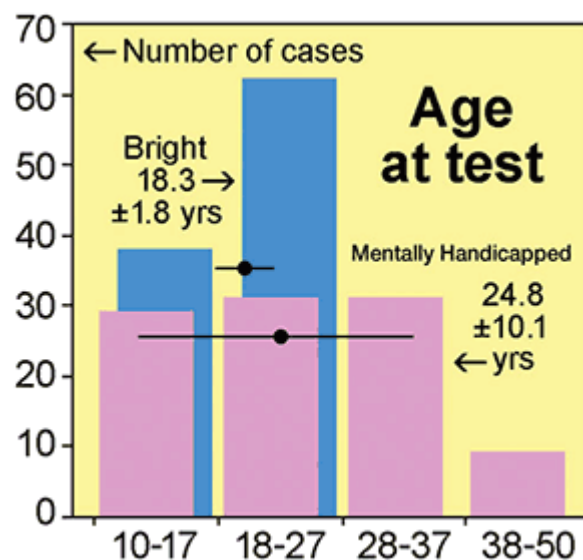
A month later, at a Pune astrological seminar, we explained that tests, indeed many tests, are necessary if astrology is to establish itself as a science. The organizer then said he could provide a set of ten rules that would tell whether a horoscope's owner was mentally bright or handicapped, and urged the astrologers present to participate in our experiment.

In India, leading astrologers have their own astrological organizations, and so we wrote to those on our list (about a dozen) inviting them to judge all 200 horoscopes. Two responded with expressions of interest, of which one sent in its judgment. The other remained silent.

An Interesting Sub-Test

Although the Maharashtra Astrological Society had urged astrologers to boycott our experiment, its president kept meeting with us. Among other things he gave us a rule for predicting sex and another rule for predicting intelligence, both of which he claimed were correct in 60 percent of cases. But when applied to our set of 200 horoscopes, the predictions were respectively 47 and 50 percent correct, which offers no advantage over pure guessing or tossing a coin.

Results of Our Main Test



Breakdown by age of our 100 + 100 test cases. About half of the mentally handicapped cases are older than our bright teenagers, which could have provided cues but evidently didn't.

Of the twenty-seven astrologers who participated, not all provided personal details, but fifteen were hobbyists, eight were professionals, nine had up to ten years of experience, and seventeen had more than ten years of experience. So they clearly formed a competent group. Their average experience was fourteen years.

If the astrologers could tell intelligence from a person's horoscope, they would score close to forty hits out of forty. In fact the highest score was of twenty-four hits by a single astrologer followed by twenty-two hits (by two astrologers). The remaining twenty-four astrologers all scored twenty hits or less, including one professional astrologer who found thirty-seven intelligent and three undecided (so none were mentally handicapped!), of which seventeen were correct. The average for all twenty-seven astrologers was 17.25 hits, less than the twenty expected by chance (e.g., coin tossing) and well within the difference of ± 3.16 needed to be statistically significant at $p=0.05$. So much for the benefits of their average fourteen years of experience! Certainly no scientific theory would survive such a poor success rate!

The institution whose team of astrologers had judged all 200 horoscopes got 102 hits, of which fifty-one were bright and fifty-one were mentally handicapped, so their judgments were, again, no better than tossing a coin.

Tragically, our statistician, Sudhakar Kunte, died in an accident in 2011, and the security he imposed on data storage has so far made it difficult for us to perform further tests, such as whether the astrologers agreed on their judgments, whether they could pick high IQ better than low, and whether the three astrological methods used (Nirayan, Sayan, Krishnamurty) differed in success rate. We hope that the access to this data will eventually be possible.

Only two tests of Western astrologers have involved the judgment of intelligence. In Clark (1961) twenty astrologers averaged 72 percent hits for ten cases of high IQ paired with cerebral palsy, but this famous result could not be replicated by Joseph (1975), where twenty-three astrologers averaged only 53 percent hits for ten cases of high IQ when paired with the severely mentally handicapped. In any case the sampling error associated with $N=10$ is more than enough to explain both results, which is consistent with the dozens of other tests that have been made of Western astrology (Dean 2007). It is also consistent with the few tests of Western astrologers who practice Vedic astrology, for example Dudley (1995).

Conclusion

Our experiment with twenty-seven Indian astrologers judging forty horoscopes each, and a team of astrologers judging 200 horoscopes, showed that none were able to tell bright children from mentally handicapped children better than chance. Our results contradict the claims of Indian astrologers and are consistent with the many tests of Western astrologers. In summary, our results are firmly against Indian astrology being considered as a science.⁷

Acknowledgments

The Department of Statistics, Pune University, and the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune, provided infrastructural support while this experiment was being conducted. A brief account appeared in *Current Science* 96(5), 641–643, 2009. My special thanks to Geoffrey Dean of Perth, Western Australia, for providing information on tests of Western astrology as well as giving me a general background of astrology in the West versus the East.

Notes

1. Babylonian omen ideas arrived in India around 450 BC during the Persian occupation, followed, around 200 AD, by Greek astrological ideas based on planets. To these were added new ideas to suit Indian culture. The end result was largely the Indian astrology still in use today, which exists in numerous schools disagreeing over details (most schools of astrology, Indian or Western, disagree over details). The main differences from Western astrology are a preoccupation with reincarnation and karma, use of the sidereal zodiac instead of the tropical zodiac (they now differ by nearly one sign due to precession), exclusion of the non-classical planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto in favor of the two lunar nodes Rahu and Ketu, use of twenty-seven lunar mansions or nakshatras, and progressively smaller and smaller subdivisions of the signs (Stein 1995 and Rao 2000).

2. Braha (1986, xiii) warns that the complexity can be dealt with only by intuition and experience, so Indian astrology cannot be properly learnt from books. But tests of Western astrologers have found that neither self-rated use of intuition nor experience raise their success rate above chance (Dean and Kelly 2003). So why should Indian astrologers be any different?

3. At one time Rao ran a computer horoscope service but without predictions. It was “only to prove to ‘omniscient’ astrologers that a confirmed anti-astrologer can also do what astrologers do, and with greater efficiency and knowledge.” His charge for fooling you was thirty rupees.

4. According to ancient Hindu texts, each believer has 8,400,000 rebirths from which they are released only by attaining enlightenment. At say, fifty years per birth, and no change over time, the allocated rebirths span more than 400 million years, roughly the age of the earliest hominids.

5. More examples can be found in Premanand et al. (1993) and also via Internet search engine, albeit with a need to persevere in your searching. For starters, try searching for “*astrology michael prabhu*.”

6. But some come close. For example Rakesh Anand (2010) used astrology to make several important decisions in his life, but the results were disastrous. So he prepared horoscopes for twenty-four celebrities and nine personal friends, changed their names, and was able to get 101 astrologers from everywhere in far northern India to predict their life and events. But none succeeded. For example, they predicted no political career from the horoscope of George Bush and no big money from the horoscope of Bill Gates. He concluded, “astrology is a misleading and useless superstition” (6). He also offered a prize of one million rupees (about \$20,000) to any Indian astrologer who could demonstrate that astrology works, so far with no takers. For details, visit www.godvslife.com.

7. Over the years I have made many public statements against the pseudoscience of astrology, which earned me a chapter titled “The Narlikar Episode” in a 348-page, 1998 book *Astrology and the Hoax of “Scientific Temper”* by the astrologer Gayatri Devi Vasudev, then editor of *The Astrological Magazine*. Her book tries to show that scientific inquiry or “scientific temper” is prejudiced against astrology, and that critics are quite ignorant of both science and astrology. The above chapter accused me of venturing into areas I had not investigated and was therefore ignorant of. For example, I had made the supposedly inexcusable mistake of declaring that astrology was not a science. I hope the present investigation can set the record straight.

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Courtesy: The Lancet

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Govind Purushottam Deshpande, (1938 – 2013): Trapeze Artist of the Mind

Sudhanva Deshpande

G.P. Deshpande (fondly known as Go Pu or GPD) was one of India's pioneering experts in Chinese Studies (he taught at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University for nearly four decades, till 2004), a leading Marathi playwright, literary and cultural critic, poet, polymath public intellectual, Marxist, founder-editor of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* and long-time columnist in the prestigious *Economic and Political Weekly*. GPD inhabited many worlds with ease, wit and charm, but remained, at heart, a small town boy (he grew

up in Rahimatpur, district Satara), gazing at the world with wonder and joy, but also a sharp and unique insight that only someone from the periphery has.

His first play was *Udhwastha Dharmashala*, about a radical left-wing professor being persecuted by his university. Satyadev Dubey was the first one to see its dramatic potential –though the play had little ‘action’, he had full faith in this politically charged ‘drama of ideas’. Encouraged by Dubey, Shreeram Lagoo took it up. It was a virtuoso performance, one of Lagoo’s best. This was 1974. The following year, Mrs. Gandhi imposed the Emergency. *Udhwastha Dharmashala* proved to be prescient.

Rajinder Nath then produced it in Delhi, with a young Om Puri, freshly out of the NSD, in the lead. When Om Puri moved to Bombay, he produced it with himself, Naseeruddin Shah and Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury. Shyamanand Jalan directed it in Calcutta with himself and Chetana Jalan in central roles. Many other productions followed all over the country.

You could say that GPD pioneered the political play of ideas and discussion in India. Satyadev Dubey directed three of his plays – *Andhar Yatra* in 1987, *Chanakya Vishnugupta* in 1989 (also produced by Lagoo in Marathi) and *Raste* in 2002. In the meanwhile, GPD had written *Satyashodhak*, bio-play on Jotirao Phule, for Jana Natya Manch in 1992. Atul Pethe directed it in 2011 with actors drawn from the Pune Municipal Corporation’s sanitation workers. With over 100 performances in an year, the play was a tremendous success, and helped re-introduce GPD to an entirely new generation of Marathi theatre goers and radical activists.

GPD’s engagement with Phule was long and continuous. He commissioned translations of Phule’s Marathi works, and edited the seminal volume *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* for Left Word Books, and later wrote a slim but rich book, *The World of Ideas in Modern Marathi: Phule, Savarkar, Vinoba* for Tulika. GPD viewed Phule as revolutionary, not a reformer, because he was the only one who consistently argued that caste is a system that cannot be reformed, it has to be annihilated. In that sense, Phule was of course the precursor of Ambedkar, but GPD’s originality lay in showing how Phule carried forward the anti-caste agenda of the medieval bhakti movement on the one hand, and is the forerunner of socialism on the other (his follower Narayan Meghaji Lokhande was an early organiser of the Bombay working class). In other words, Phule opposes caste not from a moral-ethical standpoint alone, but as an exploitative and oppressive system.

GPD joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) sometime around the Emergency. During the Emergency, he wrote critically against Mrs. Gandhi’s government in the *EPW*, going so far as to calling her

The Czarina. His friends cautioned him, saying that he might be arrested, but GPD didn't flinch. His youngest brother, Vikas, a socialist and at the time a disciple of George Fernandes, was arrested as soon as the Emergency was declared, and remained imprisoned in Pune's Yerawada jail right till the end.

Though GPD was never an activist in the strict sense of the term, my guess is that he wouldn't have minded being arrested. There was once a hilarious incident when only he and I were at home in the evening and a couple of men arrived, spoke to GPD, and drove off with him in a white Ambassador car. When he still hadn't returned till late at night – we didn't have a phone in those days – there was panic since he wasn't at any of the places where he might have been. I was no use – no, I said to repeated questioning, I had never seen the two men before; I didn't hear what they said to Baba; he didn't say where he was going and when he'd be back; no, they didn't spend too much time at home; yes, it was a white Ambassador. At 2 a.m., my mother and some close friends were convinced that GPD had been picked up – till the man himself returned, happily whistling tunelessly, after having had a drink or three with two younger Marathi writers who were visiting Delhi.

In any case, his writings against the Emergency caught people's eye, both on the Right and the Left. I remember once Arun Shourie – then an anti-Emergency crusader, a star journalist, traversing that brief interregnum of his career when he went from being a lapdog of the World Bank to the lapdog of the RSS – came visiting our JNU home. I have a vague memory of GPD telling me, much later, that Shourie wanted him to join some anti-Emergency group, but GPD parried because he didn't trust the younger man's politics.

He was also spotted by a man whose politics he did trust – the legendary communist B.T. Ranadive. BTR was responsible for bringing GPD into the Party. "I've seen your play," the older communist said to the young playwright, talking of *Udhwastha Dharamshala*, "and I like it." He paused for a moment, and then continued: "You may be surprised that I say I like it." The play, after all, contains a sort of a sympathetic critique of the Communist Party, and BTR had the public reputation of being a strict disciplinarian. "But I think you are doing something that no one else has done. You are talking of politics, of ideologies, of ideas, in an entirely new way. Nothing in Marathi writing is like what you have written. And I think you have an astonishing grasp of and ability with the Marathi language. Your Marathi is simultaneously historical and modern. I can't think of any other writer who writes the language as you do. For someone so young, this is extraordinary." GPD was in his late thirties. "But let me also say this," BTR continued. "Some on the Left will criticize you. Ignore them. You see, our job is to criticize. Your job is to ignore us, and keep writing."

But what really persuaded GPD to join the Party was BTR's impassioned plea that "We have to join the battle of ideas." This was a phrase I was to hear again and again as I grew up, and particularly after I came into the movement myself, and most certainly GPD made it his entire life's purpose. If GPD had a gravestone, this might have made a fitting epitaph: "He joined the battle of ideas." GPD retained a deep respect and admiration for BTR through his life, and took his work in the Party very seriously, including, for instance, intervening in the teachers' association in JNU, and defending the students' movement.

But when he criticized the Soviet Union for invading Afghanistan in his *EPW* column, and BTR suggested to him that he might tone down his critique a bit, his response was unequivocal: if he merely towed the Party line in his columns, why would anyone read him? He was willing to forgo his column altogether, he said, but not write anything that went against his professional judgement, and that further compromised his commitment vis-à-vis his readers. That he refused to buckle is to his credit, of course, but, I often think, it is to the Party's credit that it was willing and able to accommodate views that went against its position.

Later, too, on the question of the crackdown at Tiananmen Square, his critique was sharp: "What has happened in Tiananmen Square in Beijing has nothing to do with socialism. How does it matter if the cat is black or white if it catches mice, Deng had asked. The cat has killed the students, but to argue that it has done so because it is red is patently untenable." These words were written as a Party member. He walked that thin line adroitly – on the one hand, retaining his independence of thought, and on the other, being deeply respectful of the Party and in fact arguing in favour of the Leninist notion of the tightly disciplined, cadre based, vanguard party.

He was the critical insider, someone who remained sympathetic to the Party and the movement at large long after he stopped being a Party member, and as a rule never declining any invitation to speak he got from the Party or any of its mass organizations. My mother's work in AIDWA and the Party was a source of deep pride for him, and he supported it in his own quiet way. He was often critical of this or that stand of the Party, and we'd often talk about it. But the one thing he never did was to indulge in loose talk or to carelessly criticize the Party in public. This was the only important Communist Party anywhere in the world, he reminded me more than once, which had the courage, and the ideological caliber, to maintain its independence from both the Soviet Union and China.

GPD, then, was a warrior of ideas. Once, several years ago, I was chatting with an old JNU student. He told me about a public meeting that GPD addressed sometime in the early 1970s against America's war in Vietnam. He said, being an economics student, he had never imagined that quotations from Sanskrit and medieval Bhakti poetry could flow so easily and naturally in an anti-imperialist speech. That this speech –

analytical, trenchant, sarcastic, poetic – was delivered by this small, slim lecturer with a boy's face made it even more remarkable.

In time, many of us got used to GPD's speaking style, but back then, it is true, it must have appeared sui-generis and all too unique. Recently, I met a young Marathi novelist. He said he was startled – pleasantly – at how easy it was to make friends with GPD, but even more stunned at the range of his reading and his ability to pull out the precisely apt quotation at the perfect time. Apart from Ram Bapat (a towering Marathi intellectual, GPD's closest friend, who died in July 2012), he said, GPD is the only person he knew who could discuss Marx and Vinoba in equal depth – not to mention, I thought to myself, Panini and Mao, Kalidasa and Hegel, Vijay Tendulkar and Wittgenstein.

As I listened to this stranger talk about him, I had the vision of GPD as a trapeze artist of the mind – soaring, connecting points you could never think were connected with breathtaking acrobatic ability, eliciting from his audience a collective gasp of wonder and admiration. That agile, supple mind, forever curious, forever inquisitive, is now gone, leaving the world of ideas bereft.

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Who Are Behind India's Asarams?

Anand Teltumbde

The way godmen and godwomen are thriving, with an influential section of their followers in the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, and even in premier scientific and technological establishments, the Constitution's hope of the inculcation of "scientific temper" lies shattered. The assassination of Narendra Dabholkar, a rationalist devoted to the eradication of superstition, on the one hand, and the roaring "success", until very recently, of the self-proclaimed godman Asaram "Bapu" in spreading unfounded beliefs, on the other, are pointers in this regard.

It is over a month since Narendra Dabholkar was gunned down in Pune. Despite the nationwide outrage over this shocking incident, there is absolutely no progress made by the Maharashtra police in apprehending the culprits. In my immediate reaction, in an article entitled "Dabholkar Is Done a Gandhi", I concluded with a cynical prophesy that we would never get hold of Nathuram this time. It did not require clairvoyance or divine prowess to predict that Dabholkar's murderers will not be caught. The police claim to

have completed enquiries of over 2,000 persons, at an incredible rate of some 80 persons a day, and have almost concluded that the culprits have not left any clues.

As those who are familiar with his work on the eradication of superstition know, Dabholkar was killed because of his stubborn opposition to the fraudsters, claiming to possess divine and mystic power, who exploited the gullible masses. Moreover, he was openly opposed by the sanatani Hindus who sided with these fraudsters as part of their religion and condemned him as their dharma shatru. In their temerity, they justified his murder as the karmaphal (fruit of his karma) and continue spewing venom against him even to this day.

The continuing winking of the state at this assassination, as also its procrastination in the Asaram episode (alleged sexual assault of a schoolgirl) until this so-called spiritual guru's (he calls himself Asaram Bapu) inevitable arrest, amply exposes the forces and dynamics underlying the increasing menace of Buwas and Babas. Self-proclaimed godmen like Asaram Bapu are taking the country into an abyss of darkness, a predicament that rationalists like Dabholkar have been trying to check.

Asaram Episode

By no means is Asaram's an isolated case of a conman allegedly committing crimes under the cover of godmanship with a following of millions of people. There are hundreds of thousands of them operating at various levels and "market" segments in this country, quite a number with religious-business empires extended across many countries. It is only once in a couple of years that the tip of the iceberg shows up and they become subject of public discourse as in the case of Asaram in a relatively minor incident of alleged sexual molestation of a 15-year-old student of his gurukul. The devotees, under the total hypnotic spell of these tricksters, instead of seeing such acts as crime, consider them as part of the dispensation of divine bliss and crave for it. A stray case of coming out of this mind-enslavement is ruthlessly suppressed by the goons of godmen. From such a multilayered fortification, it is extremely rare that someone musters the courage to tell the world the gory tales of the goings on in the ashrams of the so-called godmen. Sex appears to be a penchant of all godmen. The rationale lies in the Hindu notion of mortal body and immortal soul and the devotee is brainwashed into a complete surrender to the guru in order to be one with god.

Asaram is said to have begun his career as a bootlegger in the eastern part of Ahmedabad. Many remember him as selling country liquor on the banks of the Sabarmati, a very lucrative business in a dry state. He set up a small ashram in Ahmedabad in 1971 and tried to ape Rajneesh who had a roaring business in the global spiritual market. He could not however make a mark as an orator, but made up for this deficiency with dance. His meteoric rise began with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming to power

in the state. Today, his empire comprises over 400 ashrams and numerous institutions in the country, most of them built on huge tracts of land valued at hundreds of crores of rupees.

With Asaram now in jail, the public authorities in various states have suddenly woken up to find them illegal. Sexual assaults or financial irregularities are not the only alleged crimes; the charges include murders too. It is alleged that this conman indulged in black magic involving human sacrifice. On 3 July 2008 two students of his Motera Ashram in Ahmedabad, Dipesh Vaghela and Abhishek Vaghela mysteriously disappeared and their bodies were found after two days in a riverbed near the ashram. The Gujarat police hushed up the case, attributing the killings to a 14-year-old boy. Even after the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) booked seven followers of Asaram for the culpable homicide in 2009, the real culprits are still at large. There have been similar instances of deaths and disappearances even in the past but nothing ever happened. The 11-day high drama before he was arrested by the Jodhpur police from his Indore ashram exposed the reluctance of the state to act, for Asaram has the active support of the Hindutva forces. It is anybody's guess that he would come out of jail on bail, and when this happens, it will be almost impossible for the girl's family to stand its stead.

Magnitude of the Menace

Asaram is just one godman. There are an estimated five million of them, godmen and godwomen, exploiting people's gullibility to amass wealth. Just a glance at the wealth of some of the infamous ones reveals the magnitude of this menace. The wealth that Satya Sai Baba and Mahesh Yogi controlled, or the affluence of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is mind-boggling. The turnover of the organisations that some of these so-called spiritual gurus – for example, Mata Amritanandamayi of Kerala, Baba Ramdev, Sudhanshu Maharaj, and Murari Bapu – control might shame many mid-sized companies. Many of them offer mind-training methods, which are nothing but sophisticated trickery. But besides these biggies, there are numerous spiritual entrepreneurs, petty babas and buwas, who operate unsophisticatedly at the lower end of the market, which caters to ordinary people. They do all kinds of black magic and are known for their objectionable ways.

Add to this the temples and forms of festivities like Ganeshotsavas or Durga Pujas, which make a thriving business playing on peoples' insecurities. Leave apart the multi-billionaire Tirupati Balaji, there are many Tirupatis in the making all over the country. They may not be indulging in apparent unlawful activities but insofar as they reinforce the occult and thwart scientific temper (which the Constitution of India calls upon all citizens to promote as part of our fundamental duties), they are retrograde. Persons like Dabholkar made a distinction between faith and blind faith as also religiosity and superstition. These are pedantic arguments; for instance, one might say that believing in god is faith but believing in spirits is blind faith, or,

one might argue that untouchability is bad but the caste system that is its source is not. Blind faith is, after all, just a fluid extension of faith; and, faith itself should be confined to one's private self.

Brand Ambassadors

Frankly, such fraudulent money-making enterprises of the godmen cannot run without the tacit consent of the state. Most politicians follow godmen, at the personal level, to overcome the sense of guilt that stems from their omissions and commissions. Right-wing parties like the BJP openly use godmen, eyeing their followers as their constituency. The other parties also have to countenance for the fear of alienating the Hindu majority. Many of them are partners in the sinister enterprises of the so-called godmen. Keeping people mired in superstition deflects their attention from the reality of their lives. It impels them to attribute their plight to divine forces and thereby their exploitation goes unchallenged.

Besides the political class, many in the bureaucracy and the judiciary are also followers of godmen. Thus, the state, comprising the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, has itself become the prime supporter of this menace. It has blatantly ignored the constitutional mandate of promoting "scientific temper" as per Article 51A(h) using the fig leaf of Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section 295A that makes an excuse of not hurting the religious feelings of others.

The elite, who could have otherwise been a role model for the ignorant masses, have themselves followed these godmen. As an extreme example, our Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), which are supposed to evangelise scientific temper, are found to promote spiritual discourses by Hindu seers, run mini-temples for Hindu gods inside academic complexes, and present themes of jingoistic cultural nationalism. While it is a fact that during the term of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, the IITs and other premier scientific establishments were Hinduised by installing chosen people in key positions, it is revealing that the years of Congress rule that followed, the situation has not changed. It is commonplace to see many scientists, engineers and doctors unashamedly wearing ugly vermilion or ash marks on their foreheads, armbands with talismans, and lately, ubiquitous multiple strands of threads on their wrist, publicly displaying their belief in the supernatural.

These people have become the virtual brand ambassadors of the so-called godmen. The insecurity and uncertainty created by neo-liberalism in recent years has greatly accentuated this god-ward trend in all sections of society. The common masses seek divine help for their survival; the elite, to preserve their lifestyle. Increasing instances of fundamentalism, casteism and deviant social behaviour are just the manifestations of this trend. While this is a global phenomenon, in India, the religion of the majority, Hinduism, not being an institution-based religion, provides vast space for individual godmen to thrive.

Thwarting their menace warrants scrapping the IPC Section 295A, curbing the blatant display of faith in public, cleansing the state of every sign of god/religion, discarding neo-liberalism, adopting people-empowering policies and actively promoting scientific temper.

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No biz like god biz

Ashutosh Kumar and Deepak Lokhande

Follow the money, and more often than not, it will lead to a guru — a CEO of spirituality with fingers in many pies. The god business, run with corporate finesse, is a loss-proof proposition. It's a sublime way to make ridiculous wealth. For Baba Ramdev, yoga and Ayurveda have been the main money-spinners since he shot to fame in 2004. Besides crusading against corruption and black money, he runs a 100-bed hospital, an Ayurveda college, a university, a real estate business and a mini hospitality industry at the sprawling Haridwar campus of Patanjali Yogapeeth.

Herbal kick

The business operations are divided among four trusts: Divya Yog Mandir, Patanjali Yogapeeth, Patanjali Gramodyog and the recently-formed Bharat Swabhimani. The Ayurvedic medicines and products are manufactured at a 150-acre facility near Haridwar. "We have a three-pronged distribution channel. While all the Ayurvedic medicines are marketed through Patanjali Chikitsalaya, the products are marketed through Arogya Kendras. There are 960 chikitsalayas and 2,342 kendras in the country," says Jaishankar Mishra, the editor of the in-house magazine Yog Sandesh.

The Patanjali Yogapeeth Trust takes care of the Ayurveda college, the university, and the hospital. "The college gives a degree of Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medical Sciences (BAMS). It is a four-and-a-half-year course with one year of on-campus internship. We have also started Acharyakulam – a school where

children are taught in the Vedic tradition,” Mishra adds. The first batch of the school has started this year with 250 children from across the country.

The annual fee for a student is Rs 1,60,000, which includes boarding and meals. The Patanjali University, which confers Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Arts in yoga and yoga-related subjects such as philosophy, psychology and Sanskrit, has at least 300 students. The pro vice-chancellor Kartar Singh, a retired Brigadier, is quick to point out that the “fees are highly subsidised compared to the government colleges”.

The sprawling campus has other lucrative uses. Ramdev’s trust has come up with a unique model for three kinds of flats for the elderly. Category I, Ganga, the biggest in size, comes for Rs 21 lakh; Yamuna is Rs 11 lakh and Saraswati Rs 5.5 lakh. “Any person of the age of 50 and above can apply for these flats,” says Mishra. One can start living there once the payment is made. If the person dies, the spouse gets to use the accommodation. But once the spouse dies, the flat goes back to the trust and is re-allotted. These flats have ACs, reverse osmosis, geysers, and pipeline gas connections.

Apart from these flats, there are seven towers in the campus for visitors, where the per day charge varies between Rs 500 and Rs 1,000. The towers can host 10,000 people at a time.

Ramdev is also getting into publishing with encyclopaedias on yoga and Ayurveda. Little wonder then that from Rs 2 crore, the Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust had grown to a mammoth Rs 178 crore in 2010. The lust for zeroes continues in 2013, though the baba’s lieutenants claim that a large part of the earnings come from donations.

Mother cult

In the pecking order of spiritual business and philanthropy, Amma or Matha Amritanandamayi ranks up there. The Matha Amritanandamayi Math in Kerala is home to about 3,000 people. Its activities are directed by 15 sanyasins across the country. Amma travels to about 28 countries every year to oversee the operations of her global spiritual empire, which is run with corporate efficiency.

The Matha has reaped a windfall in the business of education and entertainment. There is Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, a five-campus university, and 56 schools — from pre-primary to high schools — across India. The Amrita Institute of Medical Science is a deemed university. The Math also runs a Malayalam TV channel, which dishes out entertainment and news.

Colour of money

Once in the thick of controversies for fraudulence and sexually deviant ways of the master and his disciples, the Osho enterprise is still a bluechip company in the spiritual market. The Osho Ashram (now Osho International Meditation Resort) has mostly foreign nationals as devotees who come to India for moksha. Along with 'selling happiness', the brand also slyly pitches a variety of money-making enterprises. So you have an entry fee (even if you just want to have a tour of the ashram), for first time visitors, which is Rs 1150, apart from a daily entry sticker priced at Rs 1130 for international visitors and Rs 550 for Indian nationals. The beautiful ashram also features a sophisticated canteen, with food prices that complement the 'international' look and feel. A meal here would easily add Rs 500-700 to the Osho bank account. Interestingly, it is after Osho's demise that business has shot up. The commune was rechristened Osho International Meditation Resort a few years after the godman died in 1990. "We respond to the moment and movement creatively and intelligently. The growth has been 300 times better," says Ma Amrit Sadhana, member of management team at the resort. About 20,000 seekers visit the 1-lakh sq ft resort every month now — a 100% increase in numbers since the change. A rare phenomenon as the commune is still embroiled in many property-related controversies. According to many estimates the ashram, that once spanned 40-acres, is reduced to 25-acres. An approximate figure puts the value of the various Osho properties at Rs1500 crores. The resort is a perfect marriage of spirituality and luxury. The zen environment with bamboo trees, water bodies, peacocks, Buddha busts, mood lighting also packs in everything that a luxe holiday would entail: swimming pool, cottages and great food.

Vinita Deshmukh, RTI activist, says, "This process began after the demise of Osho (Rajneesh) to attract westerners. It has now come to such a stage where Osho's teachings are relegated to the background." An ex-follower of the commune says: "How does one deal with the fact that most of what is sold to us under the pretext of spirituality is part of the money-making exercise?"

The Osho ashram, like the other instances mentioned elsewhere in this report, is a lesson in the business of spirituality. Like any corporate office, it has a dress code for the sanyasis. While it is not a new thing, it has reached a new level of strategic spirituality. A former commune member provides some insight: "One can connect the dots if he observes how the ashram has been selling things. For instance, earlier the sanyasis would wear white robes. When the design became popular and was being replicated by certain apparel brands, the colour was changed to maroon." The dots that our source was referring to also includes popular merchandise like the Osho chappals, CDs and books. The ancillary industries that provide for hundreds of jobs that have mushroomed around Osho ashram are hard to miss. There are hotels, hostels, serviced apartments, restaurants, and shops selling junk jewellery.

Breathe easy.

The success story of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living (AOL), headquartered in Bangalore, is no less fascinating. The organisation's crowning glory is its international appeal. Founded in 1981 by the soft-spoken guru, AOL has become an educational and humanitarian movement across 150 countries claiming to have touched 370 million lives, with its stress management and other spiritual initiatives. Like all good things in life, the healing and rejuvenation process comes for a price. A three-day course in Sudarshan Kriya, its most popular programme, in the ashram costs more than Rs 3,000 for an individual, with accommodation and food.

Other AOL programmes, which include Youth Empowerment & Skills (YES) workshop — a life-skills programme for those aged between 18 and 30 — the Sahaj Samadhi Meditation, described as a natural, effortless system of meditation; and the Sri Sri Yoga courses designed by the spiritual leader himself to nurture the body, mind and spirit, too command a range of fees between Rs 3,000 and Rs 6,000.

One has to admire the efficient business model of the AOL. When a person is interested in joining a course or a programme, the AOL website guides him/her to a name and a number of a teacher who would be conducting the programme. If you are interested, you click on 'interested' and the website then asks you for your personal details (name, phone number, email ID). Within minutes a person calls you with all the information you need. The payment is made on the spot via cheque or cash, or online if the programme is at the ashram. The money collected by the teachers goes to the ashram funds, which is sent in by the teachers who are basically volunteers working part-time. Thousands of people daily take the courses. There are other spiritual gurus not so famous as the ones above. The chances are that most of them are waiting for the right moment. The moment when fame acquires critical mass and translates into money. Inside every successful godman lurks a suited CEO with a power point presentation at hand.

Courtesy: DNA,

Date: Sep 15, 2013

**Gold-rich temples refuse to unlock idle assets**

Ravi Palwankar

KOLKATA/KOCHI: Some of India's richest temples such as Tirumala Tirupati, Sree Padmanabhaswamy, Shree Krishna temple of Guruvayur, Shree Siddhivinayak and Vaishnodevi are in no

mood to part with their treasure to ease the supply crunch and control the outflow of dollars. The gold trade is keen to get a slice of a possible 20,000 ton of gold stashed away in peoples' homes and temples, which at the current gold price it worth around \$980 -\$1000 billion.

Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) receives 80-100 kg of gold and 100-120 kg of silver as offerings every month. "Tirupati has a treasure trove of Rs 70,000 crore in the form of gold bars, coins and jewellery," said Swamy Kamalananda Bharati, head of Hindu Devalaya Parirakshana Samity. It deposits the gold in banks to earn interest. It submitted 493.702 kg of ornaments to the Indian Overseas Bank BSE 6.40 % (IOB) for purpose of conversion into gold bars last December , which is equivalent to 338 kgs of pure gold after melting and purification at the government mint at Mumbai.

The bank would keep it in the form of bars. Besides bearing the entire cost of transportation, melting and minting into gold bars, the IOB will also pay an interest of 1.61% on the total gold value which in aggregate form at the end of five years will be worth 27.5 kg of gold.

The TTD has so far deposited 1353 kg of gold with the IOB It has also deposited nearly 2,275 kg of gold with State Bank of India BSE 9.74 % and earning revenues from it. But there are no plans to offload gold in the market. "We have no plans to do so. We are depositing the gold in banks and earning interest. That's it," the spokesman said.

Recently a treasure trove of gold, precious stones, rare coins, idols etc was discovered in underground vaults of Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple, believed to be one of 108 shrines dedicated to Lord Vishnu in India. The Supreme Court appointed panel is conducting the inventory assessment of the six vaults, of which one has never been opened. Though there is no official confirmation, the treasures are widely believed to be worth over Rs 1 lakh crore rupees, which will make the temple the richest in India.

The treasure is most likely to remain in the temple as it has been accumulated over centuries by kings of Travancore (present Thiruvananthapuram and neighboring regions in south Kerala) through tax, gifts, conquered wealth and offerings. "The last date for completing the inventory assessment has been extended to December 31 after which reports will be sent to various authorities. The decision on the treasures will be taken by the authorities as per the wishes of devotees," said Bhuvanendran Nair, executive officer of Sree Padmanabhaswami Temple Trust.

Unlike Padmanabhaswamy temple , the Sree Krishna temple in Guruvayur in Kerala has an annual income of about Rs 50 crore, part of which comes in the form of gold. In addition, the temple has over 600 kg of

gold, of which more than 500 kg are deposited as bars in SBIBSE 9.74 % Mumbai. The rest is kept inside the temple for daily rituals.

"Any decision to sell the temple gold can be controversial and the temple will not do it. Recently there was a call from RBI Mumbai asking about procurement of gold with the temple. But we have never thought about it," said Guruvayoor Devaswom (temple affairs) administrator K Muralidharan.

The temple deposits the gold in the bank once it reaches a certain level. The gold given by the devotees will be in the ornaments, lamps, idols etc which may have to be converted to gold bars to be deposited in the banks.

In terms of offerings from devotees, Ayyappa (believed to be son of Shiva and Vishnu) temple in Sabarimala , may come first. Apart from two months stretching from mid November to mid January, the temple opens only for a few days from the first of every Malayalam month. It gets devotees from all over South India. The gold given as the offering is kept inside the strong room in the temple premises.

"The average annual income is around. 105 crore and about 15 kg of gold," said P Venugopal , Devaswom Commissioner of Sabarimala temple. The temple comes under Travancore Devaswom , which manages hundreds of temples in south Kerala. In Mumbai, the Shree Siddhi Vinayak Ganpati Trust has no plans to sell off gold in the market.



Tribals, backwards seek own voices in Durga Puja this year

Surbhi Khyati

Over 15 districts spread across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa saw Durga Puja with a difference this festival season. Instead of the goddess slaying Mahishasur, the usual story of the Puja, this year, tribals and people belonging to Scheduled Castes and backward classes in these districts are celebrating the "demon king" as a non-Aryan inhabitant and a just king of the land, with Durga representing Aryan invaders.

They will conclude the Puja with Vijay Dashmi or Dussehra marked as 'Mahishasur Shahadat Diwas (Martyrdom Day)'. According to this version, it is the Brahmins and Aryans who spun the "false" yarn of Durga being good and Mahishasur evil.

The first Mahishasur Diwas celebration was organised by the All India Backward Students' Forum at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, three years ago — perhaps the first such subaltern version of the mythology of Mahishasur and Durga. Now, for the first time, it is being observed at such a large scale.

"The nine days of Durga Puja have never been a time of celebration for the Kherwal tribes but that of mourning. Only this time, there is greater awareness amongst our people about the story of Mahishasur and Durga," Ajit Prasad Hembram, a tribal activist organising the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day in Purulia district of West Bengal, said over the phone. "Similar ceremonies are being organised in at least 20 different places in West Bengal this year, including Malda, Bankura and Hooghly."

As per Hembram and Ashwini Kumar Pankaj, a tribal activist and editor of Johar Disum Khabar, a multi-lingual journal published from Ranchi, Mahishasur (also known as Hudhud Durga) was a clan leader of tribals in the Santhal region, who put up a strong fight against Aryan invasion. According to Hembram, as tribals did not pick up weapons against women, children, aged and the weak, the Aryans sent a woman to lure him. "The Aryans came with a proposal of marriage. But they used treachery and a woman called Durga killed Mahishasur," said Hembram.

A similar story is narrated by Pankaj: "There is a tradition among the Santhals wherein during the Navratras, they hold what is called the Dasain dance. During that dance, tribals visit houses and search for something. That something is nothing but Hudhud Durga."

Celebrating the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day on Sunday, tribals in Puruliya danced the Dasain and Kathi dance and presented their story of Hudhud Durga through a play, apart from organising meetings and telling people about Mahishasur, said Hembram.

He added that Asur or Rakshas as presented in the Vedas and Puranas were none other than natives who fought the Aryans to protect their land. "There is still a tribe called Asur amongst the Kherwals. So they are living people who are shown as devils and killed symbolically every year at Durga Puja," said Hembram.

Dr Vijay Kumar Trisharan, president of the Ambedkar Chetna Parisar, Palamu, Jharkhand, will organise the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day on Monday in his district. In Giridih district of Jharkhand, people are observing the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day by tying black clothes on their faces and narrating the story of the just king door to door, said Damodar Gop of Giridih.

Like the tribals, the Yadavs also claim to be descendants of Mahishasur. One view is that the name Mahishasur is derived from 'Mahish', meaning buffalo, the main source of sustenance for both the Yadavs and tribals.

"Mahishasur was our ancestor and these stories of him being a demon are wrong," said Rajvir Singh Yadav, founder president of the All India Prabudh Yadav Sangam and editor of the journal Yadav Shakti Patrika. "We are advocates of equality and are striving to promote rational thinking and wipe out superstitions."

Yadav will organise the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day in Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh. It will also be celebrated in Kaushambi, Deoria, Sant Kabir Nagar, Unnao and Maharajganj districts of the state.

Bihar will also see such celebrations in Patna, Nawada, Muzaffarpur and Buxar. In Muzaffarpur, the celebrations will also include an idol of Mahishasur. Harendra Prasad, who is organising the meeting in Minapur, Muzaffarpur, claims to be a descendant of Mahishasur and said he will soon get a marble statue of Mahishasur erected.

In Orissa, Kalahandi district will hold the Mahishasur Diwas, said Narayan Bagarty, a social activist. According to Jitendra Yadav, president of the All India Backward Students' Forum and a PhD scholar at JNU, the "widespread acceptance" of the Mahishasur Diwas was a successful attempt to emancipate subalterns from the grasp of Brahminical culture.

"India is a land of myriad cultures. But a particular group forced its own version of culture and religion on us. It was against this homogenisation that we started observing the Mahishasur Martyrdom Day," he said.

Courtesy: Indian Express



The Origin of Gods

Chapman Cohen

HOW many books have been written to prove the existence of God? It is not possible to say, but a good word in reply would be "prodigious" And how many sermons and lectures to prove the existence of God have been delivered? The reply here is "incalculable." The believer in God is apt to take this unending production of arguments to prove that God exists as evidence of man's unceasing

need for God. Actually it proves the growing fact that man, if let alone, would gradually get rid of all the gods. It is also proof that no demonstration of the reality of the existence of God has ever been made. A soap manufacturer of a world-wide fame, and certainly of nation-wide advertising, decided some years ago that the name of the firm was so well established that the advertising expense might be cut considerably. It was done with the result that sales declined and the old scale of advertising had to be resumed. Of course, this did not mean that less soap had been used; only that patronage had been distributed over a wider area. In the case of the belief in God the advertising has actually got less, and the consumption, so to speak, has declined. There is a still further difference in the two situations. Humanity did not begin by using soap, and then in spite of advertising, used it less and less. That occurs with the belief in God. There is a *stage* in human evolution where everyone believes in gods. They are taken for granted, something that can be reckoned as certainly as the rise of the sun. At that stage men do not discuss whether gods exist. They are more certain of them than they are of anything. The phenomena of the phases of the moon, and the nightly loss of the sun, breed in the primitive mind the possibility of the destruction of both. Primitive minds do not discuss whether gods exist, that is taken for granted; a basis for thought and action. One may summarize the situation by saying that gods are things that mankind believes in during its infancy, and of which a growing number rid themselves in maturity. The very existence of the output of books to *prove* that gods exist is, in itself, a demonstration that doubt is there *and grows*, down that it was my duty to prove either that God did not exist, or that there was not *enough evidence* to justify belief in his existence. I retorted that my duty was nothing of the kind. What I intended to prove was that God was irrelevant. It had no greater relevance to objective facts than witches, devils or fairies. The world has gone on for the past century learning more and more about the origin of religious ideas—the customary polite way of saying the origin of the gods—without many having the courage or the wit to apply that knowledge, logically, thoroughly, scientifically to the belief in God. People go on arguing as to whether there is enough evidence to prove God exists, without in the least realizing that we might as reasonably argue that while there is another explanation of an electric light or insanity, the real explanation is that the movement of a switch marks the entrance of a little demon into the bulb, and that the real cause of insanity is the presence of a demon in the body.

Where is a saying that familiarity breeds contempt? It is accepted as true by many, but it *is* only true in relation to those who cannot command respect in virtue of their own quality. It belongs to a society in which status counts for more than character and intelligence, and where stiffness and ceremony is needful to establish a sense of superiority. But if familiarity need not breed contempt, it is certain that familiarity with

certain words establishes a hold on the general mind, and hides the fact that changes in life often rob these — semi-magical—words of all real significance.

The very word “God” is an illustration of this. What is meant by it? Those who use it do so as though it carried as definite a meaning as gravitation. The truth is that not only the meanings attached to “God” are almost as various as those who use it, but no one appears to know what the word originally meant, or if they do, the original sense of it is carefully hidden by godites lest it should expose the very basis of religion. A standard dictionary says that the origin of the word is unknown, but that it is probably an Aryan word meaning that to which sacrifice is made; one of a class of powerful spirits regarded as controlling a department of nature or of human activity. Now I am strongly inclined to believe that this definition was intended to hide—to the godite—a very unpleasant truth. It does not quite Is God Irrelevant? I remember a debate many years which I had to champion Atheism Theism. My opponent, a clergyman, ago in against laid it.

(‘Reproduced from the Freethinker)



Ancient Indian Philosophy

V A Menon

Ancient Indian philosophy is based on Atheism. There is no creator or personal God in ancient Hindu philosophy. This belief is borrowed from other religions. Hinduism is not an organized Religion. It is a way of life. That is why festivals and beliefs vary from region to region. Festivals People of northern India celebrate are not celebrated in southern India. ONAM is the biggest Festival of Kerala, in South India. It's a harvest festival celebrated by anyone who is a Keralite Irrespective of religions. This festival is not celebrated by north Indians. Similarly there are festivals like Vishnu and Thiruvathira celebrated in Kerala. People from other states do not know what these festivals are. People living in various regions developed their own beliefs, festivals and Rituals. That's why Hindus are not united as a religion like other religions. Hinduism is famous for its Varieties. Theists and Atheists live together in a Hindu family, which we cannot find in other religions.

For better understanding of ancient Hindu or Indian culture and philosophy one must read the following books by DEBIPRASAD CHATOPADHYA.

1. INDIAN ATHEISM
2. INDIAN PHYLOSOPHY

3. LOKAYATA: a study in ancient Indian Materialism
4. Science and society in Ancient India
5. In defense of materialism in Ancient India

When scientists were killed and tortured in the west for their honorable work, in India knowledge was advancing. Indian Rishis (saints) like Aryabhata and Bhaskara explained planetary system centuries before Bruno, Galileo or Newton. Kanada has propounded Atomic theory centuries before scientist could do it. Charaka and Susrutha developed surgical procedures and treatment methods when medical science was not there. But this growth of knowledge went into oblivion in the middle ages.



Ayurvedic Medicine It's been around for a thousand years, but does it work?

Marc Carrier

Imagine consulting a physician who chooses to cast aside more than two centuries of medical progress in favor of the “science” of ancient Greece and Rome. No modern diagnostic techniques (X-rays, MRIs, blood tests, CAT scans, etc.), no well-researched medications and therapies, this practitioner instead studies your “humors,” the life forces alleged to be at the core of human physiology in the pre-scientific age (*black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood*), and ends up suggesting you consume a herbal concoction and chant a mantra to treat your ills. This is how Ayurvedic practitioners treat millions of patients worldwide.

Revealed to the Hindu deity Brahma¹, Ayurveda—which roughly translates as “life knowledge”—is an ancient vitalist system similar to the archaic European theory of humours,² which was supplanted by evidence-based science in the 19th century. Thus, the three Ayurvedic vital forces³—or *doshas*—are (1) *vata*, the impulse working the nervous system; (2) *pitta*, bile for digestion and other metabolic processes; and (3) *kapha*, supplying nutrition to the arterial system. Each dosha is composed of one or two of the five basic elements: space, air, fire, water and earth. Ayurvedic medicine teaches that good health is achieved when these forces are in perfect balance. But the doshas are unrelated to any known physicochemical process. You cannot see them. You cannot touch them. They cannot be measured or quantified in any manner. They are essentially the product of a rich, albeit unscientific imagination.

Ayurvedic practitioners nonetheless claim to have therapies for treating cancer, epilepsy, schizophrenia, psoriasis, peptic ulcers, bronchial asthma, malaria and many other diseases.⁴ Indeed, nothing appears to

be outside the realm of Ayurvedic care. Some Ayurvedic doctors also claim that in the absence of any clinical symptoms they can accurately diagnose diabetes, cancer, musculoskeletal disease and asthma simply by taking a patient's pulse,⁵ but remain incapable of providing evidence of a valid physiological mechanism for this amazing capability.

Are Ayurvedic doctors truly initiated into an ancient knowledge system, unknown to evidence-based science? Did erudite Indian mystics stumble on curative wisdom overlooked by modern researchers? More importantly, does Ayurveda work?

Credible scientific research answers in the negative, on all counts. Ayurvedic documentation nonetheless carries endless lists of testimonials written by patients who swear by the ancient Indian health care system.⁶ But does this anecdotal evidence prove the value of Ayurvedic therapy? Many medical conditions are self-limiting and will clear up in time—an untreated common cold will last an average of seven days; but with treatment (say, an Ayurvedic mantra or an over-the-counter cough syrup), the same common cold will last about a week. And, as repeatedly demonstrated with other CAMs (complementary and alternative medicines), simple faith in a therapy can trigger an impressive but temporary placebo effect.⁷

Also, pain—an extremely subjective assessment, at best—can often come and go in predictable and measurable patterns: an acute attack will cause a sufferer to consult a practitioner— Ayurvedic or otherwise—and, as the pain enters a cycle of remission, the relief is often wrongly attributed to the therapy. This is a classic example of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning, an erroneous inference of causality: *After* Ayurvedic therapy, therefore *because of* Ayurvedic therapy.⁸

Ayurvedic therapy is particularly thin on scientific verification, to say the least. A document prepared by the U.S. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (a branch of the national Institutes for health) states, “most clinical trials of Ayurvedic approaches have been small, had problems with research designs, lacked appropriate control groups, or had other issues that affected how meaningful the results were.”⁹

Even Ayurvedic practitioners decry the lack of evidence for its effectiveness. In the Indian national magazine *Frontline*,¹⁰ Dr. M.S. Valiathan, described as a staunch advocate of Ayurveda, admits that “clinical studies that would satisfy the liberal criteria of WHO [World Health Organization] have been alarmingly few from India, in spite of patients crowding in Ayurvedic hospitals.”

There is, in fact, compelling evidence that Ayurveda does not work.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine tested the effectiveness of guggul lipid¹¹—a mainstay of Ayurveda therapy—on lowering high cholesterol. They found that adults with high cholesterol showed no improvement. In fact, the levels of low-density lipoproteins (LDL, the “bad” cholesterol) increased slightly in some people in the group taking guggul. In a similar fashion, the School of Dentistry of the University of California, San Francisco, conducted a clinical trial of curcuminoids in oral *lichen planus*,¹² a chronic immunological disease. Curcuminoids are components of turmeric, a household spice in the ginger family often used in Ayurvedic therapies. An abstract of the study states, “The first interim analysis did not show a significant difference between the placebo and curcuminoids groups.” The results were so inadequate that “the study was ended early for futility.”

A further search of the scientific literature on Ayurveda reveals a trial on the effects of yoga on the sleep patterns of the elderly, concluding, “yoga practice improved different aspects of sleep in a geriatric population.” Much like fresh air and exercise, the beneficial effects of yoga and meditation have long been recognized¹³—but, despite a decorative coating of exotic Ayurvedic mumbo jumbo, these techniques provoke scientifically observable physiological responses. Other trials, notably one on Ayurvedic treatment of diabetes¹⁴ and a general study of Ayurveda as primary health care,¹⁵ are inconclusive and call simply for further research.

But if people choose to waste their money on ineffective therapies, what is the harm? Serious problems arise on many levels, several of them common to many CAMs.

First, health care consumers are often misled by uncritical media coverage showing so-called CAM “doctors” in white lab coats, sounding as if they know what they are talking about—which is seldom the case.¹⁶ There are few official criteria in the United States or Canada governing the competence or training of Ayurvedic “doctors.” In many jurisdictions, anyone can hang out a shingle and call him or herself an Ayurvedic practitioner.¹⁷ Thus the therapy might be harmless, but the therapist might well be dangerous. In a high-profile case,¹⁸ a California man diagnosed with leukemia by mainstream doctors put himself in the care of a high-profile Ayurvedic practitioner. After a course of traditional therapy—including herbal remedies and a mantra for “quantum sound treatment”—the Ayurvedic doctor took the patient’s pulse—that mighty Ayurvedic diagnostic tool—and declared him cured. The man died of leukemia shortly thereafter.

The “herbal” remedies of Ayurvedic therapies and many other CAMs carry the connotation of harmless, natural purity. But these concoctions have been found to be both harmful and impure. Many natural products are unsafe, some are even deadly. In 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the use of sassafras oil¹⁹ in foods and drugs based on reports demonstrating a risk of permanent liver

damage and cancer. More recently, Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands banned kava (a plant product used for relaxation) after studies showed a risk of severe liver toxicity.²⁰ Canada, the United States and the UK followed with various levels of interdiction and control, although certain jurisdictions are reconsidering total prohibition.

But there's worse.

In 2004, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA) reported that lead, mercury, and arsenic intoxication were associated with the use of Ayurvedic herbal medicines.²¹ In a Boston area study, one fifth of all Ayurvedic herbal remedies produced in South Asia contained potentially harmful products, leading researchers to conclude that "users of Ayurvedic medicine may be at risk for heavy metal toxicity." Most of the Ayurvedic community reacted predictably to this news, claiming that a few "rotten apples" had slipped under the radar with sub-par or denatured products. But how credible is this defense since mercury and lead have always figured prominently in Ayurvedic concoctions? Texts show that Ayurvedic practice flourished circa 520 BCE, with mercuric-sulphur compounds in common use as therapy.²²

Little appears to have changed.

The *Indian Express* quotes Dr. Ajay Kumar,²³ senior consultant and liver specialist at Delhi's Indraprastha Apollo hospital, saying, "We come across cases of metal toxicity where the underlying cause is longtime use of Ayurvedic medicines."²⁴

The same article also carries comments by Tara Dutt, joint secretary of AYUSH (the Indian Government's Department of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy) that are far from reassuring: "heavy metals are integral to some [Ayurvedic] formulations and have been used for centuries. There is no point of doing trials as they have been used safely and have mention in our ancient texts."²⁵

This assertion echoes the disturbing truism central to many CAMs: Ancient is synonymous with good, and a product or therapy used for centuries cannot be harmful.

The April, 1998, edition of *The Lancet* carries an article titled "Indian herbal Remedies Come under Attack" by Sanjay Kumar, in which he states, "Indian traditional medical systems, such as Ayurveda, have come under heavy criticism for irrational and outdated practices." And he goes on to quote Vaidya Balendu Prakash, chair of the health ministry's Central Ayurvedic, Siddha, and Unani Drugs technical advisory board: "The majority of Ayurvedic formulations available on the market are spurious, adulterated, or misbranded."²⁶

Adepts of Ayurvedic therapies, like proponents of other CAMs, dance a hesitation waltz between science and superstition, craving mainstream scientific status, and yet clinging to antiquated, ineffective and unprovable notions. Volumes of self-serving studies are published every year, most concluding glowing positive results for Ayurvedic nostrums. But credible randomized, placebo controlled trials with clearly positive outcomes for Ayurveda therapies remain non-existent. That is not good news for a global herbal drug industry that reportedly generates \$14.2 billion.

But profitability, like popularity and longevity, do not prove effectiveness.

Ayurvedic therapy and other CAMs ask health care consumers to accept claims—and sometimes quite outrageous ones at that—on little more than faith, which is anathema to evidence-based science. Introducing irrational, unquestioning conviction to health care can lead to personal tragedies, as the ill and misinformed confuse CAM therapists with primary care physicians. At best, this could result in serious diagnostic delays, making whatever minor benefits derived from Ayurvedic placebo or any other CAM therapy simply not worth it.

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Courtesy: e-Skeptic



Martyred flame

S. V. Venugopalan

*A humble candle's flame was haunting the
darkness engulfing broader landscape*

*It was agitating the enemies of
enlightenment whose restlessness was
borne in the hot air huffed and
puffed every now and then*

*The pencil rays of light
was enough not just to expose
the ruthless and gruesome faces,
but to identify a way of hope, too
in the din of deafening noises of
obscurantism.*

*Not that the candle was unaware of
its ever melting stature.*

*Rather conscious it was of its
self-chosen task and
was a willing participant in that process.*

*Forces of hatred and venomous politics
were hell-bent on foreclosing the
humble glow spreading across the
darker space and were
enraged that their giant shadows were
cast on the walls by its smiling presence.*

*Alas, the blackened wick turns smoky
as the flame is put off by an
avenging blow of air by the devilish mouths.*

*But, the falling candle had already lit
a million candles whose
united flame gets ready to
drive out the darkness and
torch the hatred once and forever.*

*And for the moment,
they glow, in silence,
remembering the sacrifice
of that unique, humble, unassuming
candle, thy name is, Dabholkar.....*

Courtesy: Indian Express

(The writer's email: Sc.venu@gmail.com)

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THOUGHT & ACTION

Committed to Build



Rationalist Society

Issue 1

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Holding on the Shoulders the Flag of Prudence

Anil Pundlik Gokhale

"Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom"

Bertrand Russell

Journey of an Investigator of Truth

Vivekachi Pataka Gheu Khandyavari, by Dr. Narendra Dabholkar (hence onwards: ND) identifies this book as journey or pilgrimage of investigation. A March by holding on the shoulders the flag of prudence. March through a thickest dark forest of blind faith with no light around. He and his fighting organization ANIS have assumed the role of torch bearers holding prudence as its flag and courage as its only arsenal and weapon to fight. Practiced Religion, the sum total of rituals and practices couched in Blind Faith was the target of this relentlessly working Rationalist-Activist and above all social scientist's campaign. ND as investigator was firmly entrenched in to rebellious and devotional ethos of saint movement and guided by rationalist tradition of Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Mahatma Phule, M.G. Ranade and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Review of this book is dedicated to the courage of this investigator who in his fight against blind faith discovered that this path leads into fight against the close collusion between Religious and Political Power.

He was a lucid writer and courageous logician and both these qualities are visible on every page and paragraph of this book. The intellectual means of argumentation and tools he used to counter the blind faith in open public confrontations with the opponents were devised by himself and were sourced from experimental advances in Natural and social sciences. ND's imagined pilgrimage in the book in each chapter delivers intellectual impact and blows through quotes by Saint Tukaram & Dr. Ambedkar.

Aims, Objectives and Structure of the Book

The book begins with ND's Introduction to 36 chapters and packed in 166 pages. ND identifies this as 'Chatusutri' i.e. with four pronged objectives. One - Fight against Exploitative and misguiding Superstitions. Two – Awakening and pursuit of Scientific Views and investigation of events; Three – Practical, constructive and positive Diagnosis of religion, fourthly, awakening trans-religious awareness.

This journey includes articles on cruel and crudest events of Nandosa, exposure of Balumama's claims of milking the Male Goat to camouflage extortions. The journey passes through the denser subjects of modern forms of blind faith such as extravagantly blinding claims of Vastushastra and rise of modern Godmen blessed by Politically Powerful. Suddenly he reaches into the ground work of Blind Faith, victimhood of women, the most vulnerable section of society and easiest carriers of Blind Faith. He discovers the victim, the gentle, simpleton, helpless woman enslaved through reinforcement

of repressive layers of patriarchal rituals of primitive origins and unable to question the mountainous weight of the rituals. He spurs them to rise from within every mind and every household. Last few segments are introspective. They demonstrate ND's secular commitment to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to carry forward diagnosis of religion. It aims at exposing the collusion between Dharmasatta & Rajyasatta and focused agenda of ANIS the enlightened organization for mass awakening which ND built brick despite fiery resistance from revivalist organizations like 'Hindu Jagaran Samiti'. The last couple of articles are painful skepticism about the VARKARI movement which were expected to act as harbinger of change and counter to revivalism! Nevertheless the Book ends with hopeful note- "Kelyane Hot Ahere, mhanun Kelechi Pahije'.

Upward structure of the book is entirely and fully devoted to exploration and exposure of blind faith. Chapter after Chapter' reaches out to invoke prudence of readers and highlights the urgent and effective need to build public opinion in favor of implementation of comprehensive Bill dedicated to 'Anti Superstition and Black Magic Act'. While taking on the right wing Hindu Revivalists organizations like 'Hindu Jagran Samiti' and even the political secularists, he knew very well that his life was at risk all the time. He confronted secularists who so easily surrendered to Rule of 'Religious Power (Dharmasatta). However sub-structure of the book is significant. Every chapter is *woven together by the sub plot, which takes the readers upward through the critical evaluation and diagnosis of socially ruling Hindu Religion* and its repressive ideology inherited from ages of caste rule. ND's journey is inspired, guided and is intertwining of rebellion and philosophical analysis of Saint Tukaram and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's life long desire and relentless struggles to enlighten the mass of people with spirit of scientific thought and push forward for the diagnosis of Religion to build secular & just social order.

'My Secularism' and Rationalism

Article, 'My Secularism' was written on the background of Gujarat genocide of 2002 and ANIS's peaceful demonstrations against the dictates (Fatwa) to prevent a woman (Chief Minister's wife) from stepping on to the temple's plinth (Shingnapur) met with outrageous protests and violent attacks from Right wing Hindu organizations.

As a secularist ND reiterates his commitment to adhere to the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar and differentiate himself from other rationalist traditions including Marxism since it considers influence of Religion on working masses as the resultant of helplessness to free themselves from material exploitation (page 139). For him Marxists have ignored the mighty power of the religion over masses and left it open for the ultra right wing to exploit the space fully. He does not consider that religious exploitation can neither be prevented with extensive and persuasive efforts made towards enlightenment nor with 'people's politics'. Since building up of secular society cannot be left to the 'state governance'. "We have seen how ruthlessly the state can turn itself into 'bigot' / fanatic' in Gujarat in

recent times". Secondly while "making the critical evaluation of religion it must also be seen that religion is simultaneously a manifested expression of human indebtedness & gratefulness to each subject and to all". Hence awakening of prudence is our aim and our secularism is firmly tied to umbilical cord of Saints tradition and the value system which inspired Mahatma Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

ND had immense faith in European civilization and its current achievements even though ND's writings do not provide references to European Rationalism and Rationalists like Bertrand Russell, Robert G Ingersoll and Charles Bradlaugh and others. But this relation is well and firmly established, perhaps via the influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's writings. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had close association with European Rationalists, particularly Bertrand Russell. Dr's personal discussions and readings of Russell's 'Principles of social reconstruction' and other writings on critical evaluation of religion impacted Dr. Ambedkar's own writings.

ND defines his secularism as "Thought process of how every individual and his religion, individual and state, individual and groups and dissimilar religious groups should relate to each other. This will lead to rationalization of 'own religion' and end the uncalled for hate and fear of other's religion". Since Religion not only enables individuals to conquer internal enemies, lusts and disorders but helps to achieve self control"

Maharashtra's treading on the path of Illusions and Modern Forms of Blind Faith

Blind Faith is highly seductive and overpowers even the 'secularists' in their personal and social life. ND provides several illustrations of it. The chapter ' Dharmadandachya Nimitthane' deals with an influential Godman Narendra Maharaj who had kept thousands of people in Maharashtra under his magical fold, turned them into his blind followers, intolerant towards questioning of his authority. Prevention of his entry into Air Flight and confiscation of his *Dharmadand* or *Bramhadand* , a four-feet-long staff, adorned with a saffron cloth symbolizing his spiritual authority, for security reasons not only was resisted by this Religious Leader but sparked riots at various locations across Maharashtra and at Air Ports. The protests marked hysteric outbursts which spread like wild fire. Narendra Dabholkar and ANIS confronted this Godman with an open challenge in Godman's Hermitage, over his claims made in a Books and propaganda literature spreading lies about his Black Magical powers of Treatments of diseases and several other miracles. Naredra Dabholkar's superb admirable technique of questioning, so direct and unveiling that the Godman, 'Narendra Maharaj' meekly surrendered, accepted his rout. He took to his heels and migrated permanently to New Mumbai and escaped to Ratnangiri. Amongst his followers were secularist politicians and even the then Chief Minister of Maharsashtra visited his Ashram for blessings. The visit was marked by protest demonstrations by ANIS and blistering criticism by ND and despite the chief minister visited the hermitage for blessings and spiritual guidance. The event made him to understand, how difficult is the fight against Blind Faith which has Royal patronage.

“Maharashtra on the path over shadowed by Illusion” is an article in which he once again deals with illusions of ‘Vastushastra’ again a version of blind faith associated with Architecture, Building Construction and Location positioning. The article is stinging critique of multi purpose (Zodiacal), Vixon Yadnya’ conducted throughout Maharashtra and made astounding claims purposes, to quell the threat of war proliferation, to overpower terrorism, to prevent farmers suicides, maintain the law and order situation, to prevent spread of cancer, to carry out transformation of bankrupts, broke and paupers into wealthy individuals, to give blessings to childless couples to beget child, for blessings to those severely affected by specter-demon, pishacha brahmarakshasbadha. The social impact of the Yadna was so overwhelming that Maharashtra State provided full- fledged support to it. Ruling Congress and Nationalist Congress party leaders in Maharashtra Ministry termed this Yadnya as progressive and appropriate for eradicating faults in Government buildings as per ‘Vastushastra’. This reveals how “Rajasatta” becomes victim of blind faith and ‘Dharmasatta’. The ash generated by the Yadnya, on instructions from Agricultural Minister to shower on agricultural fields to improve agricultural productivity. ND says, “The empire of illusion has overshadowed and defeated the path shown by Shahu Maharaj and the two powers will coerce the questioning of blind faith together”.

Fight from within-‘Every mind’ and ‘Every Household’

This article Ladha Ladhuya, Mana Manatoon, Ghara Gharatoon remains the most impressive, insightful, penetrative, thought provoking chapter in the book and can be identified as one of the finest one in Marathi socio psychological literature on Women’s enslavement and culture. He understood Women as the worst victims of superstitions and blind faith and religious bigotry over thousands of years of Hindu Brahminical rule in India. *At the same time, the victims become the easiest carriers and agents of perpetuations of superstitions and blind faith* . As a reformer and social activist he considered the need to fight for woman against blind faith and her victimhood as highest priority. It is to be fought by her in each and every mind and house hold. Virtually every Indian woman falls prey to archaic rituals, myths, mythology and becomes pray of religious corruption.

Socially and culturally women have become extremely vulnerable to blind faith despite the compelling force of modernity and enormous progress. On one hand, women in tribal (Adivasi) dominated districts are being haunted and tortured and stamped as witches but ND finds women in general also imprisoned in the cobweb of most primitive age old surviving rituals and customs under Indian version of *coercive and repressive patriarchic social order*. Childlessness is accounted as women’s infertility, widowed attract social shame, during pregnancies women’s patience is tested severally. Shared coexistence of male- female is mutilated through regimen of rituals and cultural demand to have male child, distrust towards widow remarriage, ‘haldi- kunkum’ ceremony, vows to obey husband for next generations. Women are extremely sensitive and vulnerable to vows and

vaikalya (test of Loyalty). Several such rituals, customs and practices in everyday life anchors their life firmly to 'blind faith' and makes them subservient to men at every moment of her life. In turn women get satisfaction that they are obeying the ancestral faith disciplining tradition. The steady fast holding on to outdated scriptures and regressive superstitions *provides women illusory stability, safety and protection and sense of belonging to community life* in the name of culture and put women in conflict with the urge for freedom and modernity.

In last few decades, the religious faiths, practices have spread like wild fire and moral and ethical values have now been hardened and ossified. What adds to it in 21 st century male domination and sense of sexual inferiority is that majority of women live under tensions of varied nature, mother in law's tortures, loss of Husband's love, ignored in family life and experiences lack of prestige, Family discords and disagreement all lead to sexual dissatisfaction and *causes conditions of schizophrenia* (NB terms it as psychological break up in to two minds). The unfulfilled sexual- love desires further add to the strains, particularly affect women since they remain inexpressible and impossible to express! Is earlier chapter ND distinguishes between two forms of mental disorders, commonly found in Indian women, as resultant of intensified conflict between love yearnings and ossified 'Blind Faith'. One seen in backward areas and other rampantly visible in urbanized, semi urbanized and rural areas. Both completely overshadow modernity.

On one hand, women possessed by unknown spirits, witches and female deities are persecuted and even killed on doubts on suggestions by 'Bhagats'. 'Angat yene', a self hypnotic state of mind, Circulation of female deities in women's body, are events manifesting *different forms of hysteria, leading to catharsis of sexual energies, relaxations of tensions*. Practitioners of 'Bhanamati' (witchcraft) use this state of woman's mind for exploitations. In modern times, spiritual Charlatanry and quackery performed by Godmen and religious leaders in different religious functions and gatherings show astonishingly highest participation of women who are treated by these quacks for childlessness, incurable and terminal diseases and sorts of unimaginable things. These illustrations of modern forms of expressions of blind faith have been exhaustively treated by ND. In another Article from this collection he throws light on the fact that these sects founded by spiritual Gurus enjoy mammoth following of women and any investigative exposure of these sects has led to turmoil and mass rebellion, collective hysteric outburst on the streets particularly by women followers.

Like a social psychoanalyst he attempts to grapple this modern phenomena (As opposed to rural and centuries old problems of 'Bhagats' and Bhanamati) and comprehend this phenomena of modern Godmen differently. He attempts to penetrate into the deeper layers of the instinctual desires. He says, "In our society, the numbers in which women so easily turn themselves into devotees of Godmen and surrender is stunning and makes one dumbfound! Can it be true that so called

influence of Godmen (Babas) lure the women and drags them into sex scandals or is it that the intense unsatisfied unconscious sexual lusts contribute to it? This has been subject of discussions". Probable reasons for following Godmen with extravagant publicity could be to get spiritual consolation and to gain collective relief from daily encountered agonies and pains. Worshiping, counting and chanting beads etc. may be the means used to repress or gain and acquire control over the outrageous and turbulent love-sexual desires. His analysis takes him close to what psychoanalysis understands by 'Hysterical Identification'. The deadly psychic disorders- collective hysteria manifests itself when blind faiths are questioned.

Psychical state of Indian women has been fully and tightly held down by 'Blind Faith' and woman is completely deprived of any 'critical reason' to question the relevance of rituals and customs which are dictates of religion. Thus eradication of 'blind faith' is integral part of empowerment of women to question the entrenched repressive rituals and practices in the personal and social life of women. The critical thought process of aspiring for change can challenge the established ossified relationship between women and blind faith. *This chapter runs like a social psychoanalytic piece of writing depicting the repressed world of Hindu woman whose social perceptions and urges have been jammed by the Hindu rituals and customs* s he follows. It is clear that this Chapter is pivot and groundwork of the Book. Through the layers of the rituals he could reach to the concept of sexual repression and which is manifested in Hysteria of multiple varieties. He depicts the reciprocal correlation between women's enslavement and Religious Bigotry 'Dharmasatta', as the universal expression of collective socio-psychological disorder.

Rajyasatta & Dharmasatta

With this analysis ND reaches to the bottom of the bottom of the domination of the patriarchal family system and the domination of religious power. Here he exposes the domain on which the Religious Authority and Political Authority both stand together. ND's concept of hobnobbing of the two systems reminds me of the analysis made by psychoanalyst William Reich, who demonstrated how Dharmasatta strengthens Authoritarian family System' on patriarchal lines.

The enormous proliferation of Dharmasatta and its hegemonic powers over urban and rural masses despite strides and growth in urban and rural scientific education and scientific advances is frightening since it shows sinking of the critical spirits of reason and courage to fight! Hence in article 'Family institution and Eradication of Blind faith' ND evokes quote by Reformist Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, "Accumulation of Knowledge is of scarce use if your behavior is not courageous". ND feels that one more reason of gaining strength of Dharmasatta is that it has simultaneously garnered enormous financial strength. Again in his Article, "Blind Faith Eradication- A most difficult, Challenge" he reiterates how Dharmasatta for its own benefits fosters and supports 'Public & General festivals' to expand its

horizons beyond all bounds. The majestic, grandeur and glorious festival celebrated over long durations, are impossible to roll out without complete controls by Black Money and No. 2 Economy. Godmen in different garbs, Bapus, Babas, Swamis and Maharaja's who have utterly no concern for the socially burning issues and human-value systems are attracting lakhs and lakhs of people as ardent followers. Audits conducted by ANIS of Funds collection in last ten years in rural and urban areas reveals and exposes that restoration of old temples, construction of caste based new temples are the exclusive aims of raising wealth and health and education of common people are completely pushed into oblivion!

In face of such collusion, he and ANIS faces darkening of horizons and almost hopeless future for the mass of working people and oppressed womanhood. This is since, struggle launched by him and ANIS from 1988 faced toughest challenge from the alliance between Dharmasatta and Rajasatta. As seen earlier in Nagar district at Shingnapur women are prohibited from stepping on to the plinth of temple to offer prayers. ANIS staged Protests March and was met with violent attacks by a dozen or more right wing organizations defending the 'faith'. Maharashtra CM Vilasrao Deshmukh mutely surrendered to dictates, visited the place to offer his vow on assuming CM's office and prayed alone by leaving his wife in lurch. He considered it more appropriate to surrender before blind religious faith than to respect Constitution and Mahatma Phule's teachings and his courage. It is painful that attempt of diagnosis and critical evaluation of religion has extinguished once and for all after Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's demise.

ND, throughout his life banked on the only arsenals and provisions of the saint traditions and the modern intellectual tradition, of Ranade, Mahatma Phule and Dr. Ambedkar. But his intellectual-emotional discourse of prudence and his experience proved that rebellion and fight against 'Blind faith' inevitably results into encounter with collusion between Rajyasatta and Dharmasatta and became his theoretical postulate. The march by Holding On the Shoulders the Flag of Prudence is comparable to Light of a small candle struggling against a darkening super cyclone!

The last chapters critically evaluate role of 'pilgrimage to Pandharpur', (VARKARI Movement) in Maharashtra, as the torch bearer of prudence. His trust in it as an ally and unflinching support to the movement against 'Blind faith' seems to have been shaken up or fractured by the influence and infiltration of followers of blind faith. His skepticism springs from the infiltration of undesirable-unwarranted trends in VARI, their dithering approach towards critical teachings of Saint Tukaram. For him it makes the struggle against 'Blind Faith' more formidable and difficult! Nevertheless majority of the participation has retained its secular character to large extent and still owe allegiance to tradition and teachings of saints. By itself VARI it is not an organized fighting force but is infused with values of affections, trust and faith and hatred of 'other' has not gripped it. Hardened chunks of lumpens- have

become active thorns and there are no means available to isolate them and defeat their venomous propaganda fostering blind faith and ND unable to accept it!

Narendra Dabholkar as 'Social Psychoanalyst'

The valued quality of this book lies in its remarkably simple, easily understood and at the same time rigorous language. The language is investigative in every sense and exposes not only the bearers of Blind Faith but like his oratory it reaches into the core of the 'weakened reason', waiting for helping hand. ND appeals to readers to uphold the Flag of Rationality and march forward irrespective of complete gloom and darkness around. The movement offers resistance but shuns violence. *It is the discourse of the feeble voice of rationality repressed under the weight of 'blind faith' which has to work through the internal resistances under the guidance of 'prudence' in search of truth.* It is Rigorous and innovative in usage and coining of the Marathi words. 'Blind Faith' for him was a process of 'ossification', hardening and reification and he uses the Marathi word and as concept 'Kathinikaran' to represent the integration of all three processes. Similarly, in order to blunt the offensive from his opponents or to develop comprehensive understanding, ND sharpens the differentiation of 'Blind Faith' from 'Faith' to enlighten the readers and listeners. In his article- 'Youth and Eradication of Blind Faith' he defines blind faith as 'Faith which does not obey the cause and effect relationship'. Again he redefines it at other place as. "Blind Faith is not just 'non-knowledge' but is "personal subjective ignorance which has acquired sacredness and having developed vested interests"(Page 106). On another occasion he distinguishes the two, "Which elevates the prudence of Human value system can be called as faith and which contributes to its degeneration is termed as 'Blind faith'. Again in the chapter, The definition of Blind Faith acquires greater rigor "as 'non knowledge' or ignorance couched in (which has acquired) holiness or sacredness, sanctified and toughened and hardened through reification of blinding social practices". His language in Book, in his Lectures and in experimental assaults on the leaders of Blind Faith, was aimed at awakening the rationality in repressed state of spectators and listeners.

At the end of his investigative journey ND emerges not only as a Rationalist but as 'Social Psychoanalyst' who reached to the bottom of the phenomena and the 'material' exploited by the exploiters or modern 'Godmen' the inexpressible but unfulfilled' wishes, prominently the sexual or procreation of the mass of the poor and oppressed people, for their own 'enrichment' and which socially results into collusion between 'political' and 'Religious' Powers. In this process he could foresee an advancing steps of Fascism. He emerges as an ardent follower, admirer of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his never lasting determination to carry out 'diagnosis of Religion' by upholding the Flag of prudence.

In certain sense his death was written on the walls of religious blind intolerance. His gruesome killing and clueless search for last three months proves his theoretical postulate *that "fight against 'Blind faith' inevitably results into encounter with collusion between Rajyasatta and Dharmasatta"*.

Vivekachi Pataka Gheu Khandyavari,

By Dr. Narendra Dabholkar

Dilipraj Publishers, (2009), pp 166

Courtesy: Countercurrents.org, 29 November, 2013



An age of disbelief: Con men thrive under the garb of religion

Swami Agnivesh & Valson Thampu

If I had a guru, and I am looking for one, I should surrender myself body and soul to him. But in this age of unbelief a true guru is hard to find. A substitute will be worse than useless, often positively harmful. I must therefore warn all against accepting imperfect ones as gurus...Has a man ever learnt swimming by tying a stone to his neck? - M K Gandhi.

Godmen are in the news increasingly for the wrong reasons. Events reported shock us for a while. Public memory being proverbially short, in a few days we leave behind the scandal and get back to business as usual. Till the next scandal breaks out, Then the next. And the next...So the tamasha of gurudom continues.

This need not surprise us. What should surprise us instead is the eager readiness of individuals, even highly educated ones, to surrender themselves to the conmen of religion. Con men thrive under the garb of religion when people abandon God. The godmen syndrome is a symptom of godlessness, not of religiosity. Godmen have as much to do with God as rock gardens have to do with flowers.

Why do people flee from God to godmen? Why do they stick even to those con men who are fleeing from the arms of law? Why doesn't the grotesque pathos of it move the rest of us to tears? Where have we misplaced our capacity for righteous indignation?

The answer may well be found in Gandhiji's warning cited above. This could well be the punishment that an 'age of unbelief' invites upon itself. The necessary outcome of 'unbelief' is not atheism. It is cultism. It is not no-faith, but false-faith. The choice is not between trusting and not trusting God. The choice is between trusting God and surrendering oneself to godmen. It is an epochal imperative therefore that cultic con men and bogus godmen mushroom and commandeer hysterically

zealous following in such an age. This does not prove the greatness of individual con men or the worth of teachings they mouth. It proves the sickness of the age in which we live.

Gandhiji warned us a long time ago against 'accepting imperfect ones as gurus'. A guru, by definition, is vastly superior to his disciples. Else the guru cannot command abject obedience and blind trust from those who cast themselves at his feet. By trusting these imperfect specimens of humanity, we degrade and consign ourselves to a level below that of their imperfection. Unwittingly, we invite irrationality, existential insecurity and a life driven and riven by falsehood, hypocrisy and moral anarchy. How else can the so-called followers of a godman now posture themselves aggressively against the arm of law?

At the popular level God is likely to lose out to godmen, given the spirit of this age of unbelief. God is a growth-imperative. Spirituality is all about our growth towards the fullness of our scope as human beings. God is the light in this pilgrimage of personal development and empowerment. Growth of this kind is a demanding, even daunting, prospect. Godmen provide the cheap, alluring alternative. You don't have to grow and assume responsibility for your destiny. All you have to do is abandon your life and destiny to the keeping of these men and women of clay. No godman or godwoman will ever ask you to outgrow your superstition or stupidity. As a matter of fact, human growth towards existential empowerment is bad news for godmen and godwomen. Growth eradicates the need to depend. It abolishes blind faith. Growth is the secret of freedom. God the Creator is also God the Liberator. In God alone, as all religions teach, are we truly free.

Courtesy: Times of India, Sep 5, 2013



On a Prayer and a Petition

Babu Gogineni

"What exactly happened, and what gave you the strength to fight your case, Mr. Salve?" I asked. "Your job as an English teacher was at risk, and your own colleagues shunned you. You are from the Dalit community, and you live in Maharashtra state where militant religion has frequently silenced dissenters - how could you hold out for 7 years?"

We were in Calicut, Kerala state, seated in the sultry winter shade outside the packed auditorium where Swatantralokam, the Annual Conference of the Science Trust was being held. Inside the auditorium, named in honour of Dr. Dabholkar, the recently assassinated Indian rationalist, were stalwarts of the Indian Rationalist and Freethinker movements. Presentations were being made,

debunking astrology, examining alternative medical systems, looking at the ethical implications of biotechnology, critiquing the lack of women's participation in the free thought movement, and discussing the problems faced by the 40,000-strong Facebook community of Kerala Freethinkers – their account was closed three times without being given any reasons.

Outside the hall were other attractions: not far was the calm and beautiful Pakkad beach where the pirate explorer Vasco da Gama landed in 1498, having found a direct sea route to India from his native Portugal. Vasco was well advised to use the sea route as Calicut's airport is considered one of India's most dangerous airports, perched as it is on a hill with a crazily small runway. Then there was the Mother of God Church, promoted by the Tourism Department of a state which promotes itself as God's Own Country despite a strong presence of Communists and Atheists. Despite these temptations, I wanted to hear 41-year old Sanjay Salve who came to Calicut to receive the Dr. Narendra Dabholkar Memorial Award for 'pursuing a lone legal battle that successfully upheld a citizen's right of not having to kneel before religious authority'. Sanjay recently secured an important judgement from the Bombay High Court that confirmed to Indian citizens a right that they always had but which needed to be asserted in the gathering storm of religiosity in the country.

Indiscipline?

"I was not looking for a fight. All I was saying was that compulsory prayer is contrary to Article 28 (3) of the Constitution of India. It says that no person shall be required to take part in any religious instruction or to attend religious worship in an educational institution funded by the state. The Maharashtra Secondary School Code mentions the national anthem, but not prayer.

"I joined the school in 1996 and for 12 years I was given excellent ratings in my Confidential Reports. But because I did not fold my hands while the rest of the school was praying in the School Assembly.

I was asked to provide a written explanation. I explained that as a Buddhist Atheist I did not wish to pray and that I had no obligation to do so. Because of this I was found to be lacking in discipline, and on those grounds I was made ineligible for a pay rise to which I was eligible based on the length of my service. We have 1600 pupils, many from the nearby slums and mostly from the lower castes. We are indeed tackling a problem of indiscipline in the school but I never thought that this was a complaint about the teachers! "From then onwards, I was made to feel unwelcome. They created an atmosphere of fear for my colleagues who began to avoid me since the management started monitoring who I was speaking to. Only two of my colleagues stood by me. I wrote to the Government repeatedly but they never responded. Only when I approached the High Court did the District Education Officer respond to my complaint.

“The Officer wrote to the School Management that I could not be compelled to pray. He also said that the 30 minutes of mandatory daily human values education means also recognising the value of secularism. They were obliged to follow these instructions, but they did not. Even when warned by the Government that their funding would be cut off, they did not relent. I therefore had to approach the High Court once again to secure my rights. After all, I stand when the prayers are said, respecting the fact that others are praying. It is just that I do not join my hands during the religious prayer and I do not hold out my hand during the oath taking ritual. Did the Supreme Court of India not rule two decades ago that the 7th Day Adventists could not be compelled to sing the National Anthem?” Ironically, Sanjay Salve is employed by the Savitribai Secondary School, named after India’s great 18th century social reformer Savitribai Phule, founder of the first women’s school in the country. Savitribai came from the Mali community – a lower caste community of gardeners to which the school management also belongs. The school’s doors are open to all communities in society: the 35% Muslims and 59% Backward Caste profile of the pupils shows the school is not a sectarian institution.

When the Court hearing started, Sanjay was offered an out-of-court settlement. Much to the dismay of his family he turned this down as he wanted the court to rule on his rights.

“I am the child of my parents”

The trial itself was instructive. “What is wrong with singing the Freedom fighter Sane Guruji’s prayer? It is secular. It says true religion should make us love humanity. It asks you to spread smiles on the faces of the oppressed,” a judge remarked to Sanjay. After all, Sane Guruji has an important place in the cultural history of Maharashtra - he fought to end untouchability, and even undertook a fast unto death to get the doors of the Pandharpur Vithoba temple opened to the untouchables.

“It is not secular because it invokes God” was Salve’s response. “I cannot say this prayer as it says I am a child of God whereas I am the child of my parents. I cannot be compelled to sing this prayer or be asked to revere the religious concept of Satyam Shivam Sundaram even if it invokes Truth and Beauty,” Sanjay contended.

The Division Bench of Justice Abhay Oka and Justice Revati Mohite Dere did not agree that the prayer was religious, but found that Salve had the fundamental right not to pray and that he could not be compelled to do so. They ruled that folding of hands was not mandatory and that all of Sanjay’s increments, stopped since 2008, should be paid to him by 31 January 2014.

“I would have permitted his absence from prayers had he requested me”, said the school’s headmaster, perhaps realising this matter could have been settled differently. He had insisted all along that letting Salve have his way would open the doors to anarchy in the school. But Sanjay is firm. “Why should I ask for anyone’s permission? My beliefs are my fundamental right, they are at no one’s mercy. Some said that I should file a case against my school management invoking provisions of the Atrocities

Act which protects former untouchables like me from discriminatory treatment. But the punishments are severe and it would not be a fair use of those provisions since all I was asking for was the right to hold my own opinions at school.

“I am an atheist, and I am a citizen. I believe in the Constitution that the former untouchable Dr. Ambedkar produced for free India. I have the fundamental right to hold my own opinion and to reject religion or God. My country’s Constitution protects me” he concluded, giving me a clearer idea of where he gets his strength from.



Legal Challenge

V. Venkatesan,
Sagnik Dutta, and
T.K. Rajalakshmi

(This article, published in Frontline, one of the prestigious magazines, just after Dr. Narendra Dabholkar’s death and the Ordinance was promulgated, describes the legal implications of the Ordinance. Subsequently the Ordinance was converted into Law in Dec 13 by Govt of Maharashtra. However the points raised in the article are still relevant.)

The Maharashtra Ordinance No.XIV of 2013, titled the “Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Ordinance”, promulgated on August 24, 2013 aims to bring about social awakening and create a safe social environment with a view to protecting people against the evil and sinister practices thriving on ignorance. Its another stated aim is to combat and eradicate human sacrifice and other inhuman, evil, sinister and Aghori practices propitiating supernatural powers or warding off evil spirits, commonly known as black magic, by connen with the sinister motive of exploiting common people.

The ordinance is modeled on a still-pending Bill introduced in the State Assembly in 2011. The Maharashtra Assembly was the first to pass such a legislation in 2005, but the Bill lapsed because it could not get the approval of the State Legislative Council. The ordinance owes a lot to the rationalist Narendra Dabholkar, who was shot dead by unknown assailants in Pune on August 20. Dabholkar was instrumental in the drafting of both the Bills. The government justified the ordinance route to the legislation by citing the alarming number of instances of exploitation of common people by connen with human sacrifice and other inhuman, evil and Aghori practices. A further justification of the government for going in for the ordinance was that the two Houses of the State legislature were currently not in session to pass a Bill immediately.

Crime and punishment

The ordinance makes a significant contribution to defining human sacrifice and other inhuman, evil and Aghori practices and black magic, by describing these in as many as 12 paragraphs appended to it as a schedule. The schedule thus appears exhaustive in its coverage of all such practices.

The very first paragraph of the schedule, for example, illustrates the inhuman practices that the ordinance aims to curb: “Under the pretext of expelling the ghost, assaulting by tying a person with rope or chain, beating by stick or whip, to make the person drink footwear-soaked water, giving chilli smoke, hanging a person to roof, fixing him with rope or by hair or plucking his hair, causing pain by way of touching heated object to organs or body of a person, forcing a person to perform sexual act in the open, practicing inhuman acts, putting urine or human excreta forcibly in the mouth of a person or practicing any such acts.”

The subsequent paragraphs lay bare practices that have found a home in a progressive State such as Maharashtra. Sample these: “Prohibiting and preventing a person from taking medical treatment in case of dog, snake or scorpion bite and instead giving him treatment like mantra-tantra, ganda-dora or such other things”; “claiming to perform surgery by fingers, or claiming to change the sex of a foetus in womb of a woman”; “to keep sexual relations with a woman who is unable to conceive, assuring her of motherhood through supernatural power”; and “to create an impression that a mentally retarded person as having supernatural powers and utilising such person for business or occupation”. Another paragraph details the kind of offence that the preacher Asaram Bapu is alleged to have committed: “To create an impression that special supernatural powers are present in himself, incarnation of another person or holy spirit or that the devotee was his wife, husband or paramour in the past birth, thereby indulging into sexual activity with such person.”

Clause 3(2) prescribes that the person guilty of violation of the provisions of the ordinance shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not less than six months but which may extend to seven years and with fine, ranging between Rs.5,000 and Rs.50,000. The ordinance prescribes similar punishment for those abetting the commission of the offence and makes it clear that the offence under it is cognisable and nonbailable.

Rather than the deterrence effect, it is the preventive aspect of the ordinance that gives hope to those aiming at social reform. Under Clause 5, the State government is expected to appoint in any one or more police stations one or more police officers, to be known as Vigilance Officer, who shall not be below the rank of an Inspector of Police, Group ‘B’.

The Vigilance Officer is entrusted with the duty to detect and prevent the contravention or violation of the provisions of the ordinance, and the rules made under it. He has to ensure due and speedy action, upon filing of complaint by any victim or any other person on the victim’s behalf, and to

give necessary advice, guidance and help to the police station concerned. He also has the responsibility to collect evidence for the effective prosecution of persons contravening the ordinance.

Clause 5(3) seeks to punish anyone obstructing the discharge of official duties of the Vigilance Officer with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months or with fine, which may extend to Rs.5,000, or with both. Considering that there may be enormous pressures on the Vigilance Officer not to perform his duty, the punishment under this provision appears rather mild, and deserves to be enhanced to match the punishment prescribed for the main offence.

That the Vigilance Officer has wide powers to search and seize materials in connection with the suspected offence under the ordinance could make obscurantist forces extremely wary of the manner in which the ordinance may be enforced.

Clause 10 of the ordinance makes it mandatory for the court convicting an offender under it to publicise the name and address of the convict along with the details of the conviction in the local newspaper. The aim of this provision appears to be to spread awareness among the people that such practices constituted an offence under the ordinance and might invite stringent punishment, so that they are discouraged from believing in them or in their perpetrators.

On September 5, 2013 two persons hawking a miracle remedy for diseases such as cancer and AIDS were arrested under the ordinance in the State's Nanded district. The successful prosecution of the two, and similar accused in future, under this ordinance (which has to be replaced by an Act, to be passed by the Legislature) will demonstrate the effectiveness of the legislation to achieve social reform.

Weak Central legislation

The only Central legislation on the subject is the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954 (DMRA). The aim of this Act is to control the advertisement of drugs in certain cases and to prohibit the advertisement for certain purposes of remedies claiming to possess magical qualities.

The Act defines magic remedy as a talisman, mantra, kavacha, and any other charm of any kind which is claimed to possess miraculous powers for or in the diagnosis, cure, mitigation, treatment or prevention of any disease in human beings or animals or for affecting or influencing in any way the structure or any organic function of the body of human beings or animals.

The Act also prohibits publication of any advertisement promoting a drug for the procurement of miscarriage in women or the prevention of conception in women; the maintenance or improvement of the capacity of a human being for sexual pleasure; and the correction of menstrual disorders in women. Compared with the ordinance, however, the punishment prescribed for an offender under the DMRA is very mild. Under the latter, in the case of first conviction, a court can sentence an accused with

imprisonment, which may extend to six months, or with fine, or with both. In the case of subsequent convictions, the maximum term of imprisonment may extend to one year or with fine or with both.

Experts have pointed to serious deficiencies in this Act. One is that the Act does not provide for an enforcement mechanism to monitor the implementation of the law. The second is that the Act does not provide for the issue of an advertisement to correct the false and misleading notions spread by the advertisement of magic remedies for certain diseases. The Act is also considered ineffective in dealing with advertisements on television and the Internet. There are no reliable data in the public domain as to the number of prosecutions and convictions under the Act. Section 9A of the Act, inserted in 1963, makes an offence punishable under it cognisable, that is, the police can initiate investigation and arrest an accused without a court warrant. Yet, the Act is rarely invoked against suspects against whom there is prima facie evidence.

In a case in the Delhi High Court recently, a social activist sought the court's direction to the authorities to take action under the Act against Nirmal Baba, a tantric in Delhi, who claimed through the electronic and print media that he had magical powers to cure diseases. However, the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi told the court that the Act could not be invoked against him because Nirmal Baba did not claim to cure any specific diseases as mentioned in the Act. Although the Schedule to the Act lists 54 diseases with respect to which misleading advertisements to cure them by unregistered medical practitioners are prohibited, godmen such as Nirmal Baba circumvent the Act by claiming that they have cures for all diseases, without specifically mentioning any of the diseases in the Schedule. The court disposed of the petition, accepting the plea of the Delhi government that it would examine whether there was a case for invoking Section 9A of the Act against Nirmal Baba.

Anti-witchcraft legislation

A few States are grappling with the issue of finding the correct legal strategy to combat the superstition-based social menace called witchcraft and their success may be a pointer to whether laws can achieve social reform. According to observers, witchcraft has claimed dozens of lives over a decade.

The obnoxious practice has another side, too, called witch-hunt, where a woman is branded a witch who can spread disease and death. The woman is subjected to brutal physical violence. A report released by Partners for Law and Development, a non-governmental organisation, in January this year noted the widespread prevalence of the practice in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam. At present only three States have specific laws against witch-hunt: Bihar, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. Odisha is in the process of finalising legislation against witchcraft.

Activists say the Prevention of Witch (Dayan) Practices Act, 1999, in Bihar, the Anti-Witchcraft Act, 2001, in Jharkhand, and the Witchcraft Atrocities (Prevention) Act, 2005, in Chhattisgarh are not being implemented effectively.

Aparna Dwivedi, a social activist who studied the laws on witch-hunt as part of the Women's Justice Team of Human Rights Law Network, highlighted some of the serious lacunae in the existing laws: "There is a provision in the laws where there are penalties for a woman if she propagates herself as a witch. This only works against the victims. Reporting of cases is very difficult, as most of the women are tortured brutally and unable to reach the police station. As part of a fact-finding team in seven districts of Jharkhand, we found that women branded as witches were not able to access the justice system. Also, the laws do not have any mandatory provisions for the government to provide relief to the tortured women. There is no protection in the form of legal or monetary support offered by the laws to women who are complaining. Often a woman who lodges a complaint has to stand up against the community."

According to her, a piece of all-India legislation will make implementation and enforcement of laws easier. A monitoring committee constituted by a national body, such as the National Commission for Women, can ensure more effective implementation of laws at the State level, she says.

In 2010, Avdhash Kaushal of the Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra, Dehradun, filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking a writ of mandamus to be issued to the States of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar to implement their respective anti-witchcraft legislation in letter and spirit. The petition also requested that the States of Assam and Odisha be directed to enact an anti-witchcraft law. It also demanded that the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development create a fund and a social scheme to treat victims of witchcraft and ensure their rehabilitation. The court dismissed the petition in March 2010 on the grounds that it was a State-specific matter and the petitioners should approach the High Courts.

Madhu Mehra, executive director of Partners for Law in Development, argued: "To frame the practice of witch-hunt only in terms of superstition misses the larger issues of the lack of governance, a sound public health care system and education. A lot of murders of the so-called witches happen because of land disputes. It is a form of gender-based discrimination against women who upset social hierarchies of gender, caste, amongst other things. In many of the cases documented by us, we have found that marking women as witches is used as a method of social control, to put the woman, or indeed her entire family 'in their place' so as to restore this status quo." She, therefore, feels that rather than enacting pan-Indian legislation which will strengthen the State's punitive power, the State's response to witch-hunt must involve restorative justice for the victims, with components of food security, protection, housing and livelihood guarantee.

According to Sashiprava Bindhani, a public interest litigant who sought the Odisha High Court's intervention to secure a draft State law against witch-hunt, most of the violence is targeted at single women, widows or couples without children. "Mostly tribal people and women of socially backward communities are branded as witches. It feeds on different forms of marginalisation where people are deprived of health, education and livelihoods by the State," she said.

The draft Rajasthan Women (Prevention and Protection from Atrocities) Bill, 2011, seeks to address the problem of women being harassed and sometimes even killed after being branded as witches. It aims to punish persons found guilty of branding a woman a witch and using criminal force against her with varying sentences of imprisonment and fine.

The Bill also has a provision to punish anyone claiming to possess spiritual and/or magical powers, and who declares any woman as a "possessed one" and performs any ritual to free the woman from the evil spirit or entices a woman or any person on her behalf with a promise to bless the woman with a child or performs any ritual on behalf of any person with the intention to harm the woman.

The delay in enacting this Bill means a missed opportunity to prosecute godmen such as Asaram Bapu with a special and stringent law.

Courtesy: Frontline, Sep 19, 2013



Hard-Wired = Permanent

Michael Shermer

We should retire the scientific idea that a hard-wired trait or characteristic of an organism is a permanent feature. Case in point: God and religion.

Ever since Charles Darwin theorized in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man* that "a belief in all-pervading spiritual agencies seems to be universal" and therefore an evolved characteristic of our species that is hardwired into our brains, scientists have been running experiments and conducting surveys to show why God won't go away. Anthropologists have found such human universals as specific supernatural beliefs about death and the afterlife, fortune and misfortune, and especially magic, myths, rituals, divination and folklore. Behavior geneticists report from twin studies—most notably twins separated at birth and raised in different environments—that 40–50% of the variance of God beliefs and religiosity are genetic. Some scientists have even claimed to have found a "God gene" (or more precisely, a "God gene complex") that leads humans to have a need for spiritual transcendence and belief in a higher power of some kind. Even specific elements of religious stories—such as a destructive flood, a virgin birth, miracles, a resurrection from the dead—seem to appear independently of one

another over and over again throughout history in a wide variety of cultures, implying that there is a hard-wired component to religion and God beliefs. I have held this theory myself. Until now.

If and when we establish a permanent colony on Mars, if its members consist of nonbelieving scientists with a purely secular worldview it would be interesting to check in 10 (or 100) generations to see if God has returned. Until that experiment is conducted, however, we have to consider the results of natural experiments run here on Earth. In the Western world, for example, a 2013 survey of 14,000 people in 13 nations (Germany, France, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Israel, Canada, Brazil, India, South Korean, and the UK and US) conducted by the German pollster Bertelsmann Stiftung for their Religion Monitor found that most of these countries showed a declining trend in religiosity and belief in God, especially among the youth. In Spain, for example, 85% of respondents over the age of 45 report being moderately to very religious, but only 58% of those under 29 years of age so report. In Europe in general, only 30–50% said that religion is important in their own lives, and in many European countries less than a third say that they believe in God.

Even in the über religious United States, the pollsters found that 31% of Americans say they are “not religious or not very religious.” This finding confirms those of a 2012 Pew Forum survey that found that the fastest growing religious cohort in America are the “Nones” (those with no religious affiliation) at 20% (33% of adults under 30), broken down into atheists and agnostics at 6% and the unaffiliated at 14%. The raw numbers are stunning: with the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over) at 240 million, this translates into 48 million Nones, or 14.4 million atheists/agnostics and 33.6 million unaffiliated. There were also generational differences that reveal a significant trend toward unbelief, with the “Greatest” generation (born 1913–1927) at 5%, the “Silent” generation (born 1928–1945) at 9%, the “Boomers” (born 1946–1964) at 15%, the “GenXers” (born 1965–1980) at 21%, the “Older Millennials” (born 1981–1989) at 30%, and the “Younger Millennials” (born 1990–1994) at 34%. At this rate I project that the Nones will reach 100% in the year 2220.

It is time for scientists to retire the theory that God and religion are hardwired in our brains. Like everyone else, scientists are subject to cognitive biases that tilt their thinking toward trying to explain common beliefs, so it is good for us to take the long-view perspective and compare today to, say, half a millennia ago when God beliefs were virtually 100%, or to the hunter-gatherer tribes of our Paleolithic ancestors who, while employing any number of superstitious rituals, did not believe in a God or practice a religion that even remotely resembles the deities or religions of modern peoples.

This indicates that religious faith and belief in God is a byproduct of other cognitive processes (e.g., agency detection) and cultural propensities (the need to affiliate) that, while hard-wired, can be expunged through reason and science in the same manner as any number of other superstitious rituals and supernatural beliefs once held by the most learned scholars and scientists of Europe five centuries

ago. For example, at that time the prevailing theory to explain crop failures, weather anomalies, diseases, and various other maladies and misfortunes was witchcraft, and the solution was to strap women to pyres and torch them to death. Today, no one in their right mind believes this. With the advent of a scientific understanding of agriculture, climate, disease, and other causal vectors—including the role of chance—the witch theory of causality fell into disuse.

So it has been and will continue to be with other forms of the hard-wired = permanent idea, such as violence. We may be hard-wired for violence, but we can attenuate it considerably through scientifically tested methods. Thus, for my test case here, I predict that in another 500 years the God-theory of causality will have fallen into disuse, and the 21st-century scientific theory that God is hardwired into our brains as a permanent feature of our species will be retired.

Courtesy: Skeptic Jan 22, 2014



Religion on Campus

As I mentioned in a recent posting, theology is losing ground in higher education across western Europe. But in certain specific ways, religion and religious culture have become a very hot campus topic, at British universities in particular. We're not talking here about religion as a subject for academic study, but about faith as something students either do or don't profess in their spare time. And in contrast with the paving stones or petrol bombs wielded by angry students in generations past, these days lawyers' letters or calculated press leaks are the weapons of choice.

Part of the background is that a majority of Britain's rising generation seems not merely indifferent to religion, but at least mildly hostile. (A poll last year among Britons aged between 18 and 24 found that 41% saw religion as a source of harm in the world, while only 14% had the opposite view. Some 82% said religious leaders had "not a lot" or "no" influence on their lives.) Yet those young people who still practise religion tend to do so in rather zealous and culturally conservative ways. That applies to campus expressions of evangelical Christianity and, above all, to Islam.

There was a brouhaha at Bristol University about a year ago after an e-mail was leaked from the president of the students' Christian Union which said women would not be allowed to teach on their own at some of the society's events, but it would be alright if they were accompanied by their husbands. Richard Dawkins, the well-known atheist campaigner, said "such nonsense" had no place in higher education. An embarrassed Union explained that it had been trying to accommodate "divergent and strongly held convictions" within its ranks, and duly sent a countervailing statement to the effect that women could speak on all occasions.

Last month, the London School of Economics apologised to a pair of students who said they were treated somewhat harshly when they turned up at an event for newcomers to the college wearing T-shirts that depicted both Jesus and the prophet Muhammed. The students, representing the university's Atheist, Secularist and Humanist society, said they were obliged to cover the shirts by security staff who threatened to expel them from the event; the staff was clearly acting in response to complaints from Muslim students. But having considered the matter, LSE agreed that it had "got the judgment wrong" in its efforts to balance the right of all students. This climbdown was preceded by some legal skirmishing. Lawyers acting for the students had demanded a judicial review of the decision, forcing the university to consult its own legal experts.

But the noisiest recent row over religion on campus exploded in mid-December when it emerged that Universities UK (UUK), an umbrella agency representing British universities, apparently accepted the idea, in certain circumstances, of segregating audiences by sex in deference to the wishes of conservative Muslim speakers. David Cameron, Britain's prime minister, led a chorus of condemnation from across the political spectrum: "Universities should not allow this and I am very clear about that." UUK duly withdrew its advice, which formed part of a series of "case studies" describing the appropriate response to various external speakers who wanted to appear on campus. If you consult the agency's guidelines now, you will find that the "segregation" case study is mysteriously missing.

But students who abhor the idea of segregation don't feel that UUK has backed down sufficiently. In particular, they are suspicious of its statement that it is "working...to clarify the position" in an area where the "law is unclear". On January 6th, Deighton Pierce Glynn, a London law firm, sent a long, tough letter to UUK on behalf of Radha Bhatt, a Cambridge undergraduate who had demonstrated against its stance. It warned that as a public agency its decisions would be subject to judicial challenge unless they conformed to British equality legislation and the European Convention on Human Rights. Segregating meetings by gender, the law firm argued, violates articles 10 and 14 of the Convention which affirm the right to receive and impart information without discrimination; as for article 9, which affirms religious liberty, it clearly lays down that this freedom could be limited if that were necessary to protect the rights of others. "Our client is concerned that universities may be moving away from the hard-won principle of equality for women and towards the idea of protecting religions—with no informed debate about the subject," the firm explained to me. (Only a generation ago, most Cambridge colleges were male-only. These days there are three female-only colleges, but none which are restricted to men.)

In some ways, campus politics in Britain are merely a rather tepid version of what goes on at American colleges, where battles over what can be said on campus, about matters like faith, sex and sexual orientation, have been raging harder and for much longer. What's missing from the British scene

is the purist libertarian voice which protects the right of individuals and sub-groups to air all manner of controversial views, from militant atheism to religious conservatism, so long as they do not harm others (as segregation might well do) or incite people to violence. That is something Britain could learn from.

Courtesy: The Economist, Jan 10th 2014



Religion, Peace and Violence

Ram Puniyani

The global scenario is full of violence in the name of religion. The acts of terrorism are attributed to religious teachings at times. The local violence, the attack on religious minorities is also presented as a religious phenomenon. The last three decades have seen this tragic phenomenon where the political agenda of super power on one hand and the agenda of fundamentalist-fascist groups on the other have been given the veneer of religion. The major theory underlying the US policy in the oil zone has derived its legitimacy from Samuel Huntington theory of 'Clash of Civilizations'. In South Asian countries spanning from Pakistan to Myanmar to Sri Lanka, the religious minorities have been on the firing line, have been facing a violence orchestrated by those practicing 'religious nationalism', those who on the pretext of defense of their religion, target the religious minorities. Be it the Hindus and Christians in Pakistan, Christians and Muslims in India, Buddhists and Hindus in Bangladesh, Muslims in Myanmar or Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka, the violence has been stalking them in one or the other form. This has increased the feeling of insecurity of religious minorities and also has eroded their rights as citizens.

What has the moral teachings of religion to do with all this? Nothing whatsoever. Still the popular perceptions and propaganda of the religious nationalist groups has been so pernicious that a 'social common sense' has been created, which gives credence to the role of religion in this violence.

It is in this light that three major statements from leaders, two of them religious and one political have come as a breath of fresh air, delinking religion from violence and espousing the peace making role of religion. Surely, religion is the most complex social phenomenon. It does encompass the element of moral values, values of humanism, so to say, on one side. At the same time it encompasses more visible facets of identity like rituals, Holy books, places of worship, the clergy and Holy Scriptures. At another level it has the element of faith in the supernatural power, deities. Surely, some of the religions did not talk of the supernatural power. In those religions, the prophets of the religions themselves, in due course have been given the exalted position of the God. This element of faith in supernatural is varying in degrees but is present all the same in different religions. These three statements, which struck the author all, came from people of diverse religious streams.

The first one came from Pope Francis while deliberating on the future of the church and redefining long-held Catholic doctrines and dogmas. The recently held 'Third Vatican Council' concluded with Pope Francis announcing that Catholicism is now a "modern and reasonable religion, which has undergone evolutionary changes. The time has come to abandon all intolerance. We must recognize that religious truth evolves and changes. Truth is not absolute or set in stone...." In a very profound manner he went on to say that "God is not a judge but a friend and a lover of humanity. God seeks not to condemn but only to embrace... Our church is big enough for heterosexuals and homosexuals, for the pro-life and the pro-choice!"

He added "because Muslims, Hindus and African Animists are also made in the very likeness and image of God, to hate them is to hate God...Whether we worship at a church, a synagogue, a mosque or a mandir, it does not matter. Whether we call God, Jesus, Adonai, Allah or Krishna, we all worship the same God of love. This truth is self-evident to all who have love and humility in their hearts!" "God is changing and evolving as we are, for God lives in us and in our hearts. When we spread love and kindness in the world, we touch our own divinity and recognize it."

This lengthy quote from his speech demolishes so many of the intolerant attitudes towards, 'others', towards those having different norms, towards those having different sexual orientation as well. We witnessed recently in India that most of the clergy of different religions welcomed the Supreme Court decision whereby same sex relations are regarded as a crime. This quote from Pope also goes against the ideology of "Clash of Civilizations"; and the media propaganda whereby people of other religions are looked down upon, and Muslims in particular are demonized by large section of people. The biggest contribution of Pope is to emphasize on respect-tolerance for those who are different from us. It also outlines that we cannot stick to dogmas which were brought in the name of religion at particular time, in the times gone by. This is an extremely welcome stance taken by the highest authority of Catholic faith, something which can be the role model for clergy of other religions to emulate.

Not to be left behind, the founding-leader and patron-in-chief of Minhaj-ul-Quran International and author of the acclaimed book *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings*, Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri condemned all acts of terrorism and said that the concept of "Jihad has been hijacked by terrorists". He is precisely on the dot as the word Jihad has been given the dastardly meaning by the Salafi version of Islam, a version picked up by the US for trainings in especially set up Madrassas, from where the Mujahidin, Taliban, Al Qaeda were brought up. The politics of control on the oil resources took an inhuman form where United States proactively picked up the pervert version of Islam and popularized as '*the Islam*', aided and assisted by its minions and large section of World media aping US in most of the matters. Dr. Mohammad, is in line with the Sufi version of Islam, where

tolerance for others and celebration of diversity has been the norm. In the name of this Jihad; so much damage has been done to the human race, to redo which massive efforts are needed and one lauds the efforts of those scholars and clerics of Islam who have presented the human, tolerant face of Islam Worldwide. One cannot forget to mention the great Islamic Scholar, Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer, who strove till the end of his life to present the Islam in the proper light, in the light of values of amity and peace. Surely even today there are many who are aggressively promoting the intolerant versions of Islam, the likes of Dr. Zakir Naik, who are doing great disservice to Islam and human society.

Swami Vivekananda is the latest icon to be hijacked by the politics of intolerance. Those who have spread hatred for religious minorities are projecting him to be their messiah. In this light Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh statement is very praiseworthy. Dr. Singh points out that “true religion cannot be the basis of hatred and division, but of mutual respect and tolerance for faiths and beliefs of all.”

One does note the glaring differences in the interpretation of same religion. One can note the diverse and opposite ways in which political actions take place in the name of same religion. Two or three examples are very obvious. From Hinduism one can see Mahatma Gandhi on one side and Nathuram Godse on the other. In Islam one can see Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad on one side and Osama bin Laden and the Muslim nationalists on the other. Same way one can see Pope Francis on one side and Anders Berling Brevik (Norwegian terrorist who killed 86 youth) on the other. It is the same religion in whose name such opposite stands are taken. We need to wake up to free ourselves from the ossified, intolerant views of religions and stand for humanistic teaching and tolerant traditions of religions.



Relevance of MN Roy

Dr Rekha Saraswat

I write here about the revolutionary philosopher from India, Manavendra Nath Roy; founder of 'New Humanism', the Radical Humanist philosophy, and his contemporary relevance after sixty years of his death on January 25, 1954.

A philosopher is the by-product of his circumstances, his past and his present, leaving his deliberations for posterity to assess and acclaim or disgrace. M.N. Roy was no exception to it. Born on 21st March 1887 in a Brahmin family of priests in West Bengal Roy underwent a complete

metamorphosis in his personality transforming from a nationalist-revolutionary into a rationalist-humanist during the final years of his life.

He followed the nationalist-revolutionary line of thought and action until he realized that independence of a nation from foreign bondage was not a necessary and natural corollary of the freedom of its citizens from servitude and exploitation.

He remained a Marxist until his disenchantment with the technique of dictatorship of the proletariat which undermined the very concept of individual freedom vis-à-vis the collective entity of a state.

He was equally apprehensive about the success of parliamentary democracy in which political parties and their leaders at the apex played a decisive role in getting candidates selected and elected to form governments; where sectarian sympathies and partisan emotions were the cunning tactics of winning elections. Roy and members of his Radical Democratic Party were not accepted by the voters because they failed to identify with the latter. He realised that it was too early for the Indian common men to understand the meaning and value of participatory democracy propagated by his party because they were seeped in the feudal tradition of monarchic hierarchy as well as in the customs of a religious patriarchal society.

Roy had envisaged a scientific, rational, democratic, egalitarian and humanist Indian society. But for the few emancipated minds, the country was not open to his cosmopolitan approach towards life. Technology and its dramatic innovations were yet to influence the lives of Indian people. Roy was much ahead of his times and refused to compromise with scientifically irrational or ethically unsound tenets of practical politics. He paid a heavy cost for this and was neglected in Indian politics. He failed to become a populist leader of the masses. Roy was too early an experiment for them.

It was only later in June 1974, twenty years after Roy's death when his idea of forming 'People's Committees' at the grass-root level, giving them power to legislate, opine and vote on issues of personal and national importance as well as to recall the erring members of legislatures, thus, rendering political parties useless (all described, in detail, in his Draft Constitution of Free India) was picked up by Jai Prakash Narayan in his concept of 'Total Revolution' and this time the youth rose to the occasion because it had become aware now of the political rights of an independent sovereign state. Yet the revolution could not fulfill its dream of a participatory party-less democracy because the voter was still not politically emancipated. They were aware of their fundamental rights but confused about their political duties. A small group of dedicated leaders could not turn the tide in 'Total Revolution's' favour and traditional power-politics again took charge of the situation.

Taking the second example from the present, after sixty years of Roy's absence from the scene, AAP wants to govern with the help of mohalla samitees, and we are again reminded of Roy's idea of 'People's Committees'.

The voter is politically more mature now than in 1954 and 1974.

But has he also become morally and culturally mature enough to know the difference of a modern, democratic, civic society from a traditional, religious, feudal society? Civic maturity of the voters is the mandatory prerequisite for the success of participatory democracy. And that has to be done with the help of expert professionals, truthful administrators and selfless politicians who are culturally reformed and scientifically modern in their approach towards life; who have learnt to respect all human beings without any discrimination with an urge to make this country a cleaner and better place to live in. They are required to work amongst the voters as their 'educators'. This is what Roy had suggested. Honesty in desire is one thing but ability to fulfil it is another. Complex issues of the modern society can't be solved merely by goodwill and consensus but by expert opinions as well, otherwise chaos and anarchy will prevail. The traditional political bosses are impatiently waiting for this turn of events to disprove the concept of participatory democracy in India challenging the ability and maturity of the voters to do so.

When our nation was basking in the glory of the Westminster model of representative democracy Roy was apprehensive of the political morality of its representatives. He had categorically said that corruption in politics and administration would be the natural byproduct of power-hungry politicians and politically immature and vulnerable citizens. He wanted a socially and culturally reformed India where ethically emancipated and politically matured voters would select politicians from among the selfless social workers at the grass-root level. He wanted dedicated humanists to help in ushering in a scientific renaissance in traditionally orthodox minds of our country-men.

We live in an age where production is sumptuous but distribution is partial; where science has conquered irrationality but religion is propagating myths and superstitions where technology has brought humanity closer but nationalism is instigating wars and terrorism. Philosophers and thinkers have contributed to the refinement of human knowledge; science and technology have given facilities of comfort and ease to human existence but frauds and deceptions have tried to spoil true human progress in all areas of the world's living humanity. In such a situation Roy's principle of ethical-politics and rational-social morality appears to be the only solution for the salvation of human strife.

Courtesy: The Radical Humanist



Social Entropy vis a vis Hindu Society

Keshava Shet Revankar

In his old book "Tao of Physics" the author Fritjof Capra writes ' most of today's Physicists do not seem to realise the philosophical, social and psychological implications of their theories. Many of them actively support a society which is still based on the mechanistic, fragmented world view, without seeing that science points beyond such view, towards a oneness of the universe".

In a recent book 'Grand Design' by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinov, they have expressed that since people live in the universe and interact with other objects in it, Scientific Determinism must hold for people as well. They go on to write" It is hard to imagine how free Will can operate if our behaviour is determined by Physical law. So it seems that we are no more than biological machines and that Free will is just an illusion.

In the case of people since we can not solve the equations that determines our behaviour we use the ' Effective Theory' that people have Freewill. That Effective theory is moderately successful in predicting behaviour, because, as we all know decisions are often not rational, or are based on a defective analysis of the consequences of the choice. That is why the world is in such a mess." One concept that scientists explain which has implications in social and Life sciences is the concept of "Entropy". Entropy is central in description of 2nd law of Thermodynamics, which is one of the basic laws of nature.

In simple language, If an isolated system or closed system is left to itself it continues to evolve at an increasing rate of disorder. The degree of disorder is the entropy of the system This means that the systems go on losing their internal energy. By contrast an open system is one which can exchange energy and matter with the surroundings. Our Planet and our body are the examples.

We can observe the manifestation of Entropy in the tendency of systems move towards greater confusion and disorder as time passed. The concept of entropy plays an important part in the modern discipline of Information theory, in which it denotes the tendency of communication to become confused by noise and static. It is common experience that whispered rumours undergo a similar garbling which might be described as " Psychological Entropy " That is why Social Scientists have adopted this term to call it "Social Entropy ", since they see a similar phenomena in closed social systems, in which there is no Input/ output of energy.

In the context of social systems we observe that the increase of poverty, intolerance and violence as indication of increase of entropy. Closed social systems started due to deprivation and

social stratification in around 5000 BC. It is recorded "The earliest urban societies were organised around the worship of local Deities, whose function it was to protect the city and ensure a plentiful of harvest. The Priests who performed the ceremonies linking people to their gods formed an aristocracy. The King was either a priest or was himself considered as God. Social stratification was reinforced the religious establishment's control of much of the community's wealth "(Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia) This is the beginning of the 'Paradox of wealth creating huge population below poverty line"

The above priest-Aristocracy nexus continued in India throughout the post Vedic period. This created stagnation poverty & wide spread suffering. In 6th century BC, Buddha preached to establish a caste less, egalitarian society, rejecting Vedas, afterlife etc. This emancipated the lower castes releasing creative and productive energy which was lying dormant for millennia, thus reversing Entropy. Vedic priests who lost their clout and patronage from the rulers were planning to oust Buddhism by intrigues and violence. Ultimately Buddhists fled en-mass from India. The Vacuum thus created helped them to revive Vedic priesthood. They were bent upon to see that heterodox, rational and secular thoughts will never again sprout. Earlier they had promoted Buddha to be Vishnu's Avatar out of compulsion to win favours from Buddhist Rulers .now they had to invent a new avatar, since they know that only God's words with state power could become a strong opiate of the masses.

Krishna a Hero of Mahabharat became the new avatar Lord Krishna and an imaginary dialogue between him and Arjun was chosen as context. Krishna became the author of whatever they wanted to implement.

Thus Bhagvad Gita (BG) was born in verse form, so that only they could interpret arbitrarily. Those who heaped praise on BG did not read with critical insight glossing over lot of contradictions and absurdities. They wowed the language and a few profound aphorisms .The main Agenda of Vedic priests was to boost the morale of the Kshatriya rulers, rationalising war and killing, even though it involves killing of near and dear ones which only made them cruel and insensitive Next they made Krishna declare of creating "Chatur Varna (BG 4-13) and iron-clad caste system to bring whole Hindu society under their influence. Buddha, Jesus and Mahamud were prophets for emancipating the suffering humanity. But Lord Krishna destroyed the whole society condemning 70-80 percent of hindus as shudras whose duty by birth was to serve the upper castes [18-44] During the next 16-18 centuries they went on loosing their creative and productive energy due to exploitation and deprivation ever increasing social l- entropy. Next priority was to creating a wide-based Priestcraft as a lucrative profession.. BG 3-- 10,11, 12 says "You worship your Gods, They in turn grant your wishes[wealth and pleasure] You have to give back to Gods, It is mutual. If you do not give back to god you are a thief." This became the foundation on which they built a multimillion commercial religious business. The same ancient formula of connecting people to their gods, brought all Tribal Totems, family deities and

myriad forms of the Trinity together into a hierarchy of Gods. They invented God-specific menu of rituals, composed mumbo-jumbo chanting and the result is a vast god-market. Vedic Priests became a vested interest in blocking intellectualism, free thought thus raising psychological entropy. Another agenda was to appropriate Kapila's Sankhya which is purely Atheistic and make it Theistic. Main Postulates of Sankhya are "Prakriti" (Primordial matter) is governed by 3 Gunas (Modes). They are Prakashasheelam "Satwam", Kriyasheelam, "Rajo", and Sthithisheelam "Tamo". These are nearly parallel to the modern physics. The 3 forces are, Strong nuclear force represent Photons and radiation, (Prakasha), Electro-Weak force--all dynamic activities in nature (=Kriya). Gravitational force represents Inertia= Sthithi (That which stands firm). According to Sankhya Prakriti creates Ego and consciousness. This confirms scientific determinism. But Lord Krishna claims that he created those Gunas and he is in them but they are not in him.

In recent decades there were signs of rational and secular ideas sprouting in a few quarters. To block this the saffron-forces fueled by the Epicenter of Priesthood have to nurture a new Avatar, to come to power and sustain their hold on the whole society. The strategy is similar to the one used against Buddhists. To create a vacuum and instability, it is first to infiltrate into every organ of the state, police and even Army; mastermind communal clashes, manipulate print and visual Media to market gods and superstitions Etc. The worst antinational act was to block Free-thought and argument preventing Parliament from functioning over a long period to spread distrust, disorder in the governance.

The new Avatar adopted the same method as in BG-First rationalising the Killing and then Philosophizing. The Gap between the past and the present in the minds of the youth and the large middle-class is filled by this Avatar with rhetoric on Pride, past glory, distortion of History, falsity and Pomp of Headgear etc. of the medieval period. An Emotive word Hindutwa is coined to trap the Lower Castes to do their dirty jobs. Even their Stalwarts could not explain as to what is Hindutwa just as the LeT leaders could not define "Jehad". Lord Krishna glorified himself in Chapter 9&10 and used abusive words like 'Naradhama and 'Papi' against those who breeched "Chatur Varna" etc. The new Avatar also uses abusive language repetitively Ad - nauseum. Now to cover up their guilt over killing Mahatma Gandhi they are attempting to appropriate the legacy of Sardar Patel.

The tragedy was the State failed miserably to implement, from the beginning, Article 51 to develop scientific temper among younger generations. This should have been at Primary and secondary education to develop awareness against superstition and blind faith.

Even Media at present is found intellectually lacking to enlighten the youth. 80 percent of Hindu society has mortgaged their brains to Priests, Astrologers, and Hundreds of treacherous 'Gurus' and Godmen. Even educated Elite are affected by this Spiritual sloth. If a scientist carries a mini-model of

space -craft to a temple for Deity's blessing, we can imagine the extent of increase of 'Psychological Entropy'.



Book says 'hugging saint' ashram is murky world

Jayaprakash K

Thiruvananthapuram: An Australian woman, who served Mata Amrithanandamayi for two decades, has exposed in her memoir the “hugging saint’s” ashram as a murky world of physical, sexual and mental torture, promiscuity power-madness and intolerance. Money and gold donated by the guru’s devotees for Amrithanandamai Mutt’s charity works was diverted to construct mansions for the Mata’s siblings and was invested in her father’s fisheries business. It was also used to create assets worth billions of dollars, including a medical college and a super-specialty hospital in Kerala.

The ashram’s authorities shrugged off Gail ‘Gayatri’ Tredwell’s claims in her book, *Holy Hell: A Memoir of Faith, Devotion and Pure Madness*, terming them “a figment of her depressed mind” for which she had been taking medicine. “We are not initiating any legal action against her,” ashram spokesman Sudeep Kumar said.

Tredwell’s book was published online by Amazon.com and in print by Walter Tree Press in October 2013. Tredwell was Amrithanandamayi’s personal assistant for nearly two decades from January 15 1981, when the then 20-something arrived at a small dingy house in a swampy coastal village near Kollam in her quest for spirituality. It was this house or ashram where Amrithandamayi stayed in with her parents and three sisters.

“In front of me was a simple plastered home and a shrine set amid a dozen or so coconut palms, surrounded on three sides by swamp,” Tredwell writes in her memoir about the first time she saw the ashram. By the time she walked out of the congregation in 1999 — over the repeated rape she underwent by Amrithandamayi’s chief male disciple Balu, the physical and mental torture by the Mata herself, and the absence of spirituality she had come looking for — the ashram had grown into a monstrous, concrete complex replete with modern facilities and residential flats for rich foreign and Indian devotees.

Tredwell claims that she was not treated any better than a housemaid is treated by an Indian family. She was cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing for Amrithanathamai besides accompanying her on foreign trips to cook for the Mata and members of her entourage. The Mata’s mood swings, writes Tredwell, were unpredictable. “Once behind closed doors, she was no longer a saint or a loving, holy mother. Her disciplinary measures for me had always been hitting, kicking, slapping and verbal abuse and denial of my greatest joy — that of serving her.”

Courtesy: DNA

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A Short History of Evolution: Morality

Carl Coon

Our “short history” outlines the case for the scientific view that life and human civilization evolved without divine intervention. With evolution as our central theme, we identified a chain of events that leads from the primordial soup to my sitting here writing this explanation. The evidence for most of these events comes from such subjects as astronomy, cell research, climatology, paleo-archeology, and, of course, the historical record.

In this article we shall discuss certain moral and philosophical issues that have been bothering thoughtful people for thousands of years. We cannot possibly try to summarize the substance of their arguments and conclusions in this short narrative, but I hope to demonstrate that our understanding of evolution can provide fresh perspectives on some of them.

The Origin and Evolution of Morality

We can infer that our remote ancestors began to develop a human sense of right and wrong behavior after they left the jungles of Southern Africa and learned to survive as bipedal hunters. The change to monogamy goes back to this period as far as we know, and so does the practice of sharing kills of the larger mammals with the group as a whole, rather than just feeding the immediate family. These behavioral changes must have evolved symbiotically with the physical changes the archeological record shows for that ancient era when the switch to savannah life occurred.

Much later, *erectus* and its cousins developed fire and, here and there, the first signs of ritual burial. However, morality as we know it probably remained only latent until *sapiens* arrived on the scene, and language evolved along with altruism, making possible the evolution of larger societies. When reciprocity and reputation entered the equation, concepts were needed to describe whether individuals could be trusted. Morality provided those concepts, with the concepts of good and evil as standards for judging behavior.

When groups became larger and more complex, the concepts of good and evil proved useful for a lot more than gossip within the group. Simple village-level ways of judging others didn't work too well at the tribal level and hardly worked at all when wars produced empires and people dealt regularly with strangers. Concepts of right and wrong grew more complex and were supplemented by legal systems and other means of coercion. Religion emerged, and then nationalism, to support the new multi-tiered societal structures.

Morality, in short, evolved along with other features of cultural evolution, not as an isolated phenomenon. It was both an enabler of other kinds of evolution and was enabled by them.

Human Nature

Human nature as generally understood covers behavior that is innate, not learned. You cannot change how your genes are encoded, though you can usually override their instructions as necessary—this is a large part of what civilization is all about. But when learning something “comes natural” the whole learning process becomes quicker, easier, and more durable.

The accuracy with which genes transmit information is now well established and is a foundational concept for our understanding of evolution. We define life itself in terms of genetic descent. Nevertheless, where we used to see a sharp line between behavior that is transmitted genetically and that which is learned, or between nature and nurture in common parlance, we now see a zone, an area that exists in between like the intertidal area between land and sea. There is a good bit of research going on at present into how this zone between nature and nurture works.

Biological evolution proceeds at a much slower tempo than cultural evolution, and efforts to change human behavior take a lot longer when that behavior is part of human nature. Most of us are fully aware of this distinction when applying it to individuals, but less so when dealing with whole societies. Mao Tse Tung tried to alter the human nature of a whole nation in a generation, with catastrophic results.

Salvation and Original Sin

Any good stew starts with solid ingredients. When paternalistic, belligerent, war-prone religions evolved out of the Neolithic era, the old recipes weren't enough. One of the new ingredients was the idea of salvation, which worked by embellishing the ancient belief in life after death with the proviso that you have to earn your ticket by following the rules before you can go to heaven.

One way to spice up the idea of salvation was to add the idea of redemption. But who needs redemption and why? What is there to redeem? One answer is the idea of original sin, which tells us that we have to work at redemption, for if you're born a sinner you can't go to heaven automatically, you have to earn it. This rather harsh view of human nature was seized on by Christians, who made it a central pillar of their faith. This idea persists today, largely within Christian denominations. The concept of original sin has no place in humanist thought. We do not believe a child is born guilty of anything. There are more humane ways of encouraging responsible social behavior.

Free Will, Infinity, and Divinity

All through this narrative we've been dealing with issues of scale. To get even an inkling of what was going on when the first life on earth began, we had to think in terms of hundreds of millions of years. But that scale was useless when we looked for clues to explain the origin of our species. There we had to pull back our zoom lens and survey the scene in terms of hundreds of thousands of years. A scale of

thousands of years served for the Paleolithic and perhaps the early Neolithic eras, and after that we started measuring history in centuries. Now we have the daily news. The same principle applies to space. We need a very different focal lens to view atomic particles from the ones we use to peer outward at galaxies, and in between there is a small slice of the space continuum that constitutes the world we grew up in.

Scientists help us extend our reach from atoms to galaxies and from microseconds to eons, but for most of us, the small slice of time and space we inhabit is enough. We are preoccupied with our own time/space bubble, and while explorations outside it can be interesting and have sometimes proved useful, we usually leave them to the specialists.

Nevertheless, the concept of infinity has always troubled us. If the world we live in is composed of things that result from prior causes, which in turn were caused by something else and so on, can you go back in time and space to a first cause or do you just keep on going, and where does it all end? This is simply one way to express the basic paradox of infinity, which forms the basis for the issue of free will versus determinism. Am I responsible for actions that were caused by other events in a chain of causation that goes back indefinitely?

One conclusion that emerges from our study of evolution is that humans are most likely the first and only species to worry about this issue. The paradox that lies at its core is a product of the human capacity for abstract thought, not something that actually exists in the space/time continuum we inhabit. We might conclude, on this basis, that it isn't important.

But it is, because perplexity over infinity leads us all too often to belief in divinity. We see things happening that we now know can be explained but only with different lenses on our camera, and those lacking those lenses usually invoke supernatural causes. Galileo got in trouble with the Jesuits partly because he questioned dogma about the nature of infinitely small entities.¹ Most people still believe that if you keep pushing long enough, you'll eventually get to some root cause. Since they don't know what else to call it, they call it divine.

Nothing we have learned equips us to answer the paradox embodied in the idea of infinity, but we now can put it in better perspective. If we can consider free will and divinity as issues arising from the paradox, and see them in an evolutionary context, we can conclude that the paradox itself is insoluble and can stop worrying about it. We have plenty of other issues that need our attention more urgently.

Courtesy: <http://thehumanist.com/tag/a-short-history-of-evolution/>



Cosmopolitan Secular Humanism with an Indian Blend

Dr. Floris van den Berg

Living with values is the autobiography of Indian humanist philosopher and human rights activist Narisetti Innaiah (b. 1937). Historian of ideas Bill Cooke writes in his book *A Wealth of Insights. Humanist thought since the Enlightenment* (2011) a long chapter on the rich tradition of humanism and related –isms in India, despite the general impression that in India there is a lack of humanism in society; think of the misogyny, the hideous caste system, forced marriage, social ostracism, superstition and wide spread quackery. Narisetti Innaiah is one of those brave Indian freethinkers who have devoted their life to change India towards a more humane society by using humanism as a moral compass.

Living with values tells the story of Innaiah. Although he has an interesting story to tell, it is a pity that there is not one consistent storyline in the book. The book could have been improved if it was proofread. Also there is a lot of namesdropping, which makes it less interesting for a general audience. The same is true of the appendices, which show letters from (famous) people to Innaiah and a picture section of Innaiah together with celebrities. Although Innaiah touches on many humanist issues, he does not go deep into them. The book is too much a family album and too less an intellectual autobiography. Despite this, the book shows that it is possible to live an autonomous life despite living in a society, which does not cater a free, independent and rational lifestyle and to which it often is hostile. A watershed in his intellectual development is the struggle for the acceptance of his Ph.D. dissertation in philosophy of science, *Philosophical Consequences of Modern Science*, because his scientific naturalism clashes with the transcendental inclinations of his supervisor. Innaiah is a rationalist, atheist, sceptic, humanist, freethinker, liberal, feminist and scientific naturalist who strives towards a better world by using reason and compassion. Innaiah is deeply influenced by the Indian humanist thinker M.N. Roy (1887-1954) who coined the term 'radical humanism'.

Innaiah explains what he means by humanist: "By humanist I mean one who values human freedom, equality of human beings, respect for ethical values, and keeping personal beliefs at personal level without bringing them into public. [...]The scientific method follows self-corrections, which take human beings into the right path and take them away from blind faith. I also firmly stand by the human dignity and plea for avoiding child abuse. Parents should not automatically bring their faith, religion, blind beliefs to their children." (p. 12) This ideal and ideology of humanism leads to many struggles, because Indian society is full of belief, superstition, prejudices, irrational customs and traditions, misogyny et cetera. Innaiah is active in promoting reason and individual liberty by translating humanist works, and organizing and participating in

many conferences. Innaiah is a cosmopolite and he spends part of his life in the USA. In the US he became acquainted with humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz and the secular humanist organization Center for Inquiry Transnational. Innaiah established a Center for Inquiry India promoting secular humanism. Prometheus Books, Paul Kurtz's publishing company, published *Forced into Faith. How religion abuses children's rights* (2009). In this succinct but important book Innaiah vehemently argues that the liberty of children entails their freedom from religion. Innaiah argues that children should be free from religion and (religious) indoctrination and that religious education is child abuse. This is a brave statement since the majority of children around the globe are brought up religiously! Indeed, there is a long road to go for the ideals of humanism to be realized and in many aspects the road to individual freedom is a long one in India, and even more for Pakistan.

Innaiah has been working on translating important humanist texts in Telugu, including Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. Language is a problem for cosmopolitan humanism: people cannot communicate if they do not share a language. And if one (or both) of the communicators is not fluent, then this is an obstacle for both. India has several official languages, but in practice two Indians might not share a common language. In the last decades English has become more and more a *lingua franca*. But English is also problematic because for many it is not their native language. This brings me to the (humanist) idea of a common language which all people on the planet share and in which no one has an advantage. This is the idea of an artificial language (e.g. Esperanto or Lojban), which every child on the planet learns as a second language. Then all persons on the planet can speak the language they learn at home – no matter how little people speak that language – and still are able to communicate with everybody on the planet.

Innaiah belongs to a minority of humanists in India who oppose what the majority does and thinks: Innaiah is non-religious, against the caste system, in favour of equality of persons, against misogyny, in favour of liberal education and parenting and against traditional 'medicine' and superstition. Innaiah is also frustrated that even among people with higher education there is superstition: "Yet, a growing number of the educated people turned antediluvian in their outlook and behaviour. They seemed to revel in mental slavery outside their spheres of activity." (p. 131) Reflecting on the topics Innaiah addresses it surprises me that there is not more attention to the pressing problem of Indian population growth.

Things got dangerous when Innaiah organized a public meeting with Taslima Nasrin, author of the novel *Lajja (Shame)* (1993) about the Islamic violence in Bangladesh. Nasrin was forced to live in exile since 1994 due to death threats. At a speaking engagement in Hyderabad in 2007 Nasrin was attacked by Muslims. Innaiah, who was one of the hosts, tried to protect her. Fortunately nobody got injured. But this shows that in the Muslim community there are serious issues concerning the freedom of speech.

Humanists like Innaiah take up the important role to stand up for the freedom of speech even when it angers people.

During his time in the USA Innaiah noticed that Indians in the US tend to take their superstition and customs with them: "Members are divided on religious, caste and regional lines. Instead of confining their religious beliefs to homes and political differences to India, they have carried them as part of their baggage to the U.S. Lot of superstitions, blind beliefs, astrology, palmistry, geomancy (*vaastu*) and cult worship were imported which are polluting the society. Children born in America are developing differently. Which is a good sign.' (p. 179)

Innaiah is open-minded, always on the outlook to meet like-minded people, both in the India and abroad and thus creating a network of humanists, both formal (by organizations) and informal (a network of friends – I feel fortunately to be one). When he was in the USA he met many (famous) freethinking people, including philosopher Paul Kurtz, sceptic James Randi, and atheist Richard Dawkins. Innaiah is a man with a zest for life, or, to use a word from Paul Kurtz: exuberant. Although there is much to complain about India as seen from a humanist perspective, Innaiah keeps his spirit lifted in trying to promote individual liberty, reason and secularism. I hope his message will be heard both in India, and abroad: Children should be educated towards freedom and autonomy.

Living with values. An autobiography of a humanist,

Narisetti Innaiah,

Century Publications, New Delhi, 2013

Dr. Floris van den Berg lectures philosophy at Utrecht University, Netherlands. He is involved in humanism and its organizations. Among the books he authored is Philosophy for a better world (2013).



India's Superstition Industry

Meera Nanda

At one level, the arrest of Asaram is a rather humdrum, same-old story. One more godman has fallen from grace. So, what is new under the sun? Aren't we used to discovering the clay feet of our sadhu saints? Perhaps George Orwell was on to something when he said that "saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent", for no all-too-human godman can ever live up to the qualities of godliness. Perhaps the wise course to take is to reflect upon the tragedy of overweening human ambition of these fallen gurus and move on.

Yet, if one pauses to think about it, Asaram's arrest is not just a matter of one more godman's personal failings. Rather, this episode dramatises the thin line between faith and blind faith, and the near complete merger of faith, politics and money in contemporary Indian society.

Asaram's alleged rape of a 16-year-old girl is proof-if more proof is needed-why Narendra Dabholkar's struggle against superstitious beliefs and practices is indeed the need of the hour. The young girl was brought to the guru for an exorcism, of all things. From the revelations that are trickling in, it appears that this girl and her parents were made to believe by Asaram's associates that she had been possessed by evil spirits which the guru had the ability to drive out. This kind of andh shraddha, or blind faith, which our godmen so routinely encourage and exploit, is precisely what Dabholkar and his Maharashtra Andhshraddha Nirmulan Samiti were fighting against, a fight that cost him his life.

Asaram's case is also proof-if more proof is needed-that a state-temple-corporate complex is always and everywhere at work in India. Most of the times, it lies hidden in plain sight: we are so used to the sight of our elected representatives and the pillars of civil society-from prominent scientists, business tycoons to Bollywood superstars-prostrating themselves before gods and godmen that we do not notice how smoothly faith, politics and money blend into one another. It is when the godmen behave badly (as in Asaram's case), or when they fall foul of the powers-that-be (as happened to Baba Ramdev after his anti-corruption rally last year), that the veil is lifted. It is on occasions like these that we see what has been lying under our noses all along, namely, the state-temple-corporate complex.

Narendra Modi and other political leaders may want to distance themselves from the fallen godman for strategic reasons. But it is no secret that Asaram was treated as the de facto rajguru in Gujarat under both BJP and Congress governments. Indeed, when you examine the record closely, it is clear that Asaram's hugely profitable empire of ashrams, gurukuls and schools was built up with the largesse of land given by the state as grant (which he later expanded through encroachment) and as private donations from the wealthy Sindhi-Marwari community. His political connections created a protective shield around him, immunising him from many allegations of crimes (including murder of children) and misdemeanours. The godman could literally get away with murder. Asaram, of course, is hardly alone in using his political clout to amass a fortune. Behind every successful godman in India today stands a cluster of powerful politicians with free access to the public assets and the machinery of the state. Once launched, the successful gurus build business empires, which attract other corporate interests, especially those with interests in the burgeoning market in education and tourism.

Under the neo-liberal regime that India put in place to attract private capital, both global and indigenous, it has become easier than ever before to funnel public money and public assets into religion-

cum-business empires. Often all that is needed is an authorisation for a change in land use (from agricultural to institutional or commercial) and the University Grants Commission (UGC) or the State legislature conferring the status of a "university" on a teaching shop set up by a guru's trust under the pretext of imparting "value-based" education. The neoliberal mantra of public-private partnerships has benefited religious entrepreneurs as much as any other corporate interests. The difference is that the aura of holiness and the layers of shraddha and anndh shraddha protect the former from any serious inquiry, let alone a challenge.

Until recently, State governments, especially in BJP-led States, were falling over each other to offer public land to Swami Ramdev to set up subsidiaries of Patanjali Yogpeeth, his flagship ashram-cum-ayurvedic hospital in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. Uttarakhand conferred the status of a "university" on Ramdev's ashram and Haryana recognised the gurukul set up by the baba. These are fee-charging, for-profit teaching shops, not charities, though perhaps they get tax-breaks as charities. Ramdev's government-sponsored ayurvedic formulary has made millions selling drugs of dubious safety and efficacy, while Aastha, the TV channel he owns through his proxies, has raked in huge profits. In their take-off stage, these businesses were, in part, subsidised by wealthy donors in India and abroad. Once the physical assets are in place, subsidiary government agencies and corporate interests step in to develop infrastructure such as roads, hotels and resorts and run luxury buses.

This triangular relationship between the state, the peddlers of "ancient values" of Hindu sanskriti and private money has become the standard operating model adopted by nearly all brandname gurus. It makes no difference if the State in question is "secular", as States ruled by the Congress and the various regional parties claim to be, or is allied with the Hindu nationalists.

Ashram on leased land

Take, for example, the case of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, who has constructed the headquarters of his Art of Living (AOL) ashram on land leased to him for 99 years by the State of Karnataka. The corporate support of AOL from Infosys and other Bangalore-based software companies is well known. But, wait, there is more: AOL got a land grant of 200 acres (one acre is 0.4 hectare) from the State of Odisha, where a new university offering "modern teaching with ancient values" started operations last year. The same business model was adopted by Madhya Pradesh, which honoured its native son, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, with a land-grant university. (My book, *The God Market*, provides evidence of the extensive state involvement in these cases, as it does for Baba Ramdev as well. I have only gathered the publicly available evidence and connected the dots between the active partners involved-the gurus and their political and corporate backers.)

Such state subsidies to gurus are over and above the direct subsidies many State governments provide for paying the salaries of temple priests, covering the cost of temple renovation, conducting pujas on behalf of those who cannot afford them, and setting up Vedic pathshalas, where students learn *karma kanda*, or priest craft. Perhaps the biggest indirect subsidy temples get from the state is through tourism. New "pilgrimage circuits" are created by States with grants from the Central government. Indeed, it is not uncommon for State tourism departments, in collusion with temple management committees, to invent *prachin itithas* (ancient history) for the temples they want to promote, to sponsor cultural traditions associated with religious festivals (the spate of state-sponsored Navratri and Makar Sankranti celebrations in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, for example) or to invent brand new traditions altogether (the golden cart processions in the Meenakshi temple in Madurai, the staging of the "celestial" lights in the Sabarimala temple in Kerala, for example).

The open diversion of public funds and assets into religious institutions of Hindus (and of minority faiths as well, depending upon political calculations) is bad enough. But the damage the collusion of state and religions does to the cultural habitat of civil society cannot be measured in rupees alone. The state-temple-corporate complex is grounded in the shared belief in gods and a shared blind faith in gods' sales representatives here on the earth.

Faith-based nexus

When our elected representatives, policymakers and state functionaries approach the religious establishment as devotees, rather than as officials of a secular state with a constitutional mandate to create a secular public culture, what we get is a culture seeped in a disregard for the law, and a culture that protects irrational beliefs from critical scrutiny.

Take the case of the senior police officer D.G. Vanzara, charged with staging fake encounters in Gujarat. One of such encounters took the life of Ishrat Jahan, 19, and three others. In a letter of resignation written from Sabarmati Central Prison where he is lodged, Vanzara declared Narendra Modi to be his "God" and none other than Asaram to be his "guru". It appears that his resignation was provoked by the fact that his "God" failed to protect his "guru". The close entanglement of a law enforcement officer with the Hindu nationalist agenda of Modi on the one hand and with the godman on the other is obvious. The irony is that the "spirituality" he got from his guru was uncontaminated by any ethical considerations against killing innocents in fake encounters. It is indeed sobering to think how many Vanzara-type law enforcers are out there who revere Asaram-type gurus who openly prey upon their devotees. As long as this faith-based nexus is in place, what hope can one reasonably have that lawbreakers will be punished and justice will be

done, at least in those cases where the godmen themselves are implicated in the crimes being investigated?

Even more damaging is the state protection that irrational beliefs and damaging religious practices get when the powers that be approach religious authorities on bent knees and with folded hands. A case in point is Lalu Prasad's recent visit to the ashram of the 'tantric' Vibhuti Narayan aka Pagla Baba in Uttar Pradesh's Mirzapur district, where he conducted a fairly elaborate prayer.

It is well known that many of the tantric beliefs involve paranormal and occult powers for which there is no scientific evidence whatsoever. Indeed, the bhuta pretas that Asaram was promising to exorcise from the young girl he is alleged to have raped are very much a part of the tantric belief system. So ask yourself this question: will Lalu Prasad use his political clout to promote his "god" or will he promote values of critical thinking which question the existence of bhuta preta? We all know the answer.

A law against superstition?

What is to be done? Can a law against superstition-the kind that Dabholkar and his associates fought so long and hard for-help? Could such a law have prevented the latest horror story that is reported to have taken place in Asaram's ashram?

Crimes like rape and murder, of course, do not need any new laws. They only require a more stringent and thorough prosecution of the alleged criminals without the fear of god-like powers of either the godmen or their political godfathers.

But what if there were to be a law that prevents any public discourses, advertisements and/or demonstrations by anyone, regardless of which faith or tradition he/she belonged to, about their ability to expel evil spirits, or to bring about miracles that defy all the known laws of physics and biology, or to provide cures for diseases with no known cures as yet? Imagine also that such a law were enacted at the national level, with each State mandated to put it into practice. Let us also imagine-highly improbable though it is-that this law is applied stringently and with no fear or favour. (Our hypothetical law is modelled after the law that had been pending in the Maharashtra State legislature for many years, and was passed as an ordinance following the murder of Dabholkar.)

Could such a law have prevented the rape and other crimes that allegedly happened in Asaram's ashram?

The answer has to be a qualified "yes". Such a law could have prevented someone like Asaram from claiming god-like abilities in the first place. It would not, of course, make crimes disappear, as most rapes and murders do not require the cover of faith. But such a law would make it harder for faith to provide cover for crimes, frauds and other misdemeanours.

Even more important, such a law can prevent the corruption of the public discourse that goes on day and night when alleged godmen instill blind faith in occult powers and phenomena that are entirely without any basis in the facts of nature as we know them.

Will such a law deprive people of their constitutional right to freely practice the faith of their choice, as the civil libertarians fear? Is a law against superstition really a law against religion itself, as the conservative forces aligned against Dabholkar's initiative have asserted?

The right to believe and practise one's faith is a precious right that must not be infringed upon. On that there is no debate whatsoever. But the question really is this: does the freedom of religion include the freedom to profess, encourage and profit from superstition? Where does religion end and superstition begin? Or, are the conservative critics of an anti-superstition Bill right in assuming that religion cannot exist without superstition?

Those who fear that such a law will deprive Indian citizens of their freedom of conscience and free profession and practice of religion ought to read the Constitution carefully. Freedom of religion in the Constitution is subordinate to the Fundamental Rights of citizens. That means the state reserves the right to regulate or restrict any "economic, financial, political or other secular activity that may be associated with religious practice" if that activity can be shown to contradict "the norms of public order, morality, health and other provisions of this Part" ("this Part" refers to Part III of the Constitution which enumerates the Fundamental Rights of citizens). One would think that curing someone of mental stress falsely attributed to possession by evil spirits, as Asaram was claiming to do, legitimately constitute a "secular activity associated with religious practice". There is no reason why the state cannot regulate it in the interest of protecting people's fundamental interests in life and liberty.

Under the Constitution, the Indian state not only has the authority, but is in fact duty-bound, to curb those secular activities associated with religious practices that it deems contrary to the other fundamental rights of the citizens. Cultivation of a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform is indeed one of the Fundamental Duties of every citizen of India, as enshrined in Article 51A (h) of the Constitution inserted by the Constitution 42nd Amendment during the Emergency in 1977. The Supreme Court has, in a few cases, accepted the principle that as these duties are obligatory on citizens, the State should also observe them.

Those who find the prospect of such regulation an unbearable restriction on their faith have some soul-searching to do. Is their faith so fragile that it stands or falls with irrational, superstitious and harmful practices? Is it not the duty of those who claim to uphold the faith to see to it that their faith tradition cleanses itself of outmoded beliefs and irrational ways of knowing?

All said and done, there is nothing more important than to carry on with the struggle against blind faith that Dabholkar gave his life for. Commitment to a scientific temper and critical thinking is the only weapon we have against the peddlers of blind faith and their political enablers.

First published in India's Frontline magazine.

Courtesy: Campaign Against Superstition



The Sex Lives of Godmen

Mihir Srivastava

Asaram Bapu is no longer on Aastha channel, his sermons on which had become something of a morning ritual for many Indians over the past few years. He is now in jail, accused of sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl at his ashram in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. The term 'bapu' is an honorific. It means 'father' in Hindi, and in a culture where such an elder gets utmost respect, the irony is not lost on all those who sympathise with the victim of his alleged assault.

While there is no reason to suspect all godmen of depravity, it is alarming how common it is for them to sexually exploit their trusting disciples. This report is based on dozens of FIRs and testimonies of victims, as also the views of sociologists and psychologists who have helped victims and interacted with godmen. The term 'godmen' here refers not only to cult leaders like Asaram, but all yogis, maulvis, fakirs, gurus, swamis, pastors and priests who make mystical claims and hold devotees in awe.

The way many of them operate as sexual predators can be generalised. In terms of psychology, they create the paraphernalia to overcome what they suffer from: typically, some form of paraphilia ('other attraction' literally) or psychosexual disorder in which they obtain sexual gratification through unusual practices that are harmful or humiliating to others (and socially repugnant). Voyeurism and paedophilia are among the forms it could take.

Many of them try to draw legitimacy from dubious interpretations of ancient beliefs. "There is a whole esoteric tradition of *tantra*, where spiritual bliss is achieved by sexual union," says Kiranmayi Bhushi, a Delhi-based sociologist who has a keen interest in religion and *tantra*, "They exploit this tradition to lure unsuspecting *nirvana* seekers, especially from the West."

Typically, the victims of such predators are either foreigners seeking spiritual solace or girls of middle-class families struggling with the pangs of early adulthood. Sometimes the victims are children, sometimes girls and boys with disabilities.

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Rape, defined mildly, is sex without consent. A rapist creates an environment or situation where the seeking of consent becomes redundant. This is because the power equation between the perpetrator and the victim is skewed against the latter. For this reason, ashrams are “potentially prime sites of violations”, says Sanjay Srivastava, a professor of Sociology at Delhi University’s Institute of Economic Growth. At an ashram, the presiding guru is supreme. By tradition, he is not to be questioned. He is a spiritual master at whose feet his disciples are required to relinquish their ego. “The disciples are abject in front of the guru,” says Srivastava. The idea of consent, in contrast, is one of equality. It is a modern concept, he says. And in a situation where the very individuality of the disciple is rendered non-existent, consent loses relevance.

Gurus who prey on their disciples often pretend to be spiritual healers who, inspired by a higher purpose, insist on the use of their sexual organs to bestow them with beneficence. They draw strength from superstitions, thrive on the naivete of those who see them as godly, and pose as mediators of divine favour. Their seduction scripts may vary but are always purposive and well-rehearsed with spiritual talk to trap gullible children, women and men.

“I have stopped commenting on people’s sex lives,” says Sudhir Kakar, a leading psychoanalyst and writer, in response to a question on the phenomenon. He refers me to his book *Mad and Divine* that examines the relationship between religious rituals and healing traditions, both Eastern and Western, and also details the lives of some extraordinary men. The book has chapters on Osho Rajneesh, Satya Sai Baba and the Buddhist seer Drukpa Kunley. Among the points Kakar’s book makes is that godmen often repress their sexuality, denying it vent, very early in their lives. As they age, however, they begin to lose their carnal restraints as their sexuality re-asserts itself forcefully. It is a potent urge that needs to be integrated with their day-to-day selves. And being in positions of power with so many devotees in such abject genuflection to their larger-than-life images, they find easy opportunities to indulge that urge.

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Sex at such ashrams is marketed as a healing tool. Take the case of this working couple in their early thirties, married for five years and living in south Delhi: the Sharmas. Their basic problem, as they explained to a cult leader they had faith in, was that they had no problem big enough to challenge them anymore. They had lost the magic in their relationship and lives.

The cult leader, a prominent figure on television, gave them a close hearing and asked them to stay over at his ashram located in the Himalayan foothills. Within two days of their arrival there, they were huddled into a dimly lit hall with about 50 other people—singles, couples, even groups, most of them approaching middle-age—to be treated to a rhythmic recital of musical mantras.

After a brief sermon on the merit of 'letting go', the session started. As it went on, the lights grew dimmer and the music deafening till the point that the Sharmas could neither see nor talk to each other. Like everyone else, they were swaying with the rhythm, and were soon separated in a maze of dancing silhouettes. It was now a hallful of warm bodies, a sort of single organic mass with all identities blurred, as everyone began hugging, patting and kissing someone or the other. The Sharmas did, too—who, they did not know.

"This way, they destroy all previous bondings," says J, a 45-year-old British woman who was sexually exploited by a yoga guru with whom she was staying. She speaks of her experiences here over Skype. She loves India, J says, but loves to hate godmen. They destroy all bonds that people may have had before they reach the ashram, as if everything one did till that point was futile. She chafes as she recollects her time in Pune, where she was reduced to a sex worker for a guru she does not want to name. "I was like his *dasi* (slave)," says J, "I was made to believe his sexual exploitation of me was a gift to cherish."

It is usually about the forging of new bonds, the most potent being the one with the godman himself. This is the bond that defines everything else. It is an unequal one, in that it is taboo even to *think* of asking the godman a question. Disciples must commit themselves to unconditional faith in him. The godman works his charm through a skillful modulation of voice, which has a "hypnotic quality to it", says J. "I would feel that the voice is coming from distant place when he spoke to me."

After their dim hall session, the Sharmas had sexual liaisons— individually—with many others. They felt elated by the experience. It was what their dull lives had been missing, it seemed. Their guilt in the extramarital romps subsided as the evening proceeded and euphoria rose. There was a hum in the air as they subsumed their selves in the larger whole. It was all about selfless devotion. Sexual devotion to the guru usually follow such communes. "[Godmen] have in them an insatiable need to have sex because they practice yoga, which activates their *kundalis*—the centres of their consciousness," says one of the Sharmas.

One-on-one sessions are held in the privacy of the guru's chamber, and disciples are informed of the schedule in advance. These invitations are issued with words that portray it as an honour, a profound event that would uplift and change their lives forever. Disciples are often given some reading material which they may not share with anyone else. In a few cases, a private date with the godman is announced all of a sudden, taking the victims and their families by surprise. Asaram Bapu was known for such instant turns of whim. Sharma, the wife, remembers the private 'blessings' they received at the ashram only faintly, in disjoint flashes of memory. Her husband was asked to spend that night meditating. She has vague

recollections of being touched, embraced, of a damp floor in a smoky room with a flickering red lamp, and of an abdomen stirred with sensations. After that, she remembers nothing. She woke up when two women shook her. “You have been blessed by the Gurujī,” she was told.

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Victims rarely speak out, but do disclose how godmen seek to combine yoga with sex. In many cases, the chosen person is asked to sit in lotus position in front of the godman amid elaborate preparations for a ritual: fire, incense, fruits and so on. The guru maintains a meditative pose with eyes shut, as if in direct communion with divinity, and then makes a short sermon that involves touch as a means to get the message across.

A Russian girl who was raped in Rishikesh multiple times told a psychologist that when her rapist godman would touch her forehead, she would feel his energy transfer into her. “It was so soothing,” she recounts of her first time. The touch turned into an embrace, and she remembers the security of the warmth she had felt. He then asked her to take her clothes off for an unimpeded transfer of energy, had her sit on his lap, and went ahead.

Some brazenly sexual acts are accorded the status of divine rituals. According to a 27-year-old girl, a software engineer based in Bangalore, she was made to perform *rudrabhishek* on a guru in Pune who she had trusted. This ritual required her to pour milk and honey on his penis and fellate him.

In another case, a cult leader who was once hailed as one of India’s biggest individual earners of foreign exchange, asked a Frenchman who was 35 at the time to lie flat and naked on the floor. After applying sandalwood paste on his chest and forehead, the guru placed a foot on his abdomen as if he was a doormat, and then bent forward and held his penis in his fist for half an hour as a conduit of energy.

“This is not spiritualism,” objected the Frenchman as the godman began a session of oral conduction. But so taken was he with the “enormously gracious” presence of his guru, he gave in to his will without further protest. “His fingers had an electric charge,” he says, recalling how the guru ran his hands through his hair as he performed oral sex. “He made perfect sense to me about what I was experiencing in my life at that point,” he says.

Today, the Frenchman has mixed feelings about that experience. He hadn’t felt violated, but was left puzzled. “It is the undigested part of my spiritual appetite,” he says, in recognition now of the farce that it was. His fascination with spiritualism in India, however, has not diminished. He is camping in Dharamshala these days.

While some have vivid memories, many of those exploited have only foggy details of it, a result of the hynoptic methods these godmen use—often along with sedatives and psychoactive drugs. “Godmen

redefine reality for them,” says Rajat Mitra, a psychologist who has dealt with godmen and their victims, “They shake their core identity traits. They convince what they did so far was all in vain. They have a powerful pull.”

It is not uncommon for those who believe they need healing to have their bodies respond receptively to sexual stimuli. An orgasm, in such a paradigm, is a form of spiritual awakening.

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A psychologist who has studied cases of rape was hired by a renowned church in north India to monitor a preacher who was transferred from Europe, where he was found indulging in acts of paedophilia. He was in Delhi for a year and the psychologist would hold regular psychoanalytical sessions with him. Later, the preacher was found to have established liaisons with young boys even in India. “They just can’t control themselves,” says the psychologist, who doesn’t want to be named. The higher authorities of the Church were informed of the preacher’s inclinations, and he was transferred to a country in Africa.

The following incident is bizarre. A 15-year-old girl was raped on the first floor of her own family house in West Delhi by a tantric. Her family members heard her cry out, but did not intervene because they assumed it was part of an occult ritual. The tantric had promised the family a change in their fortunes if they let him perform this hours-long exercise in isolation except for the company of a ‘pure soul’, which he convinced them resides in the bodies of adolescent virgin girls. The family volunteered their own 15-year-old daughter. The tantric left with assurances of a turn in the family’s luck. The girl was too dazed to say anything. Later, when she told them what had happened, the family refused to believe her. By the time they realised the enormity of the crime, it was too late to haul up the tantric. He had gone missing.

In another shocking case, the *Gurbani* lessons of a teenager turned to horror. The girl, the daughter of a university professor in Delhi, always sang well and so her parents arranged for a granthi (learned in the Guru Granth Sahib), a man in his late twenties, to visit their home twice a week to give her lessons in religious singing. She found his pats of encouragement inappropriate, and so she complained to her parents of discomfort with the teacher’s touch. They did not see anything amiss and asked her to carry on taking classes. And then one day, when the girl’s parents were away, he sexually assaulted her.

The case of K Ramesh, a priest at a church in Gosavedu village in Gampalagudem mandal is another example of such a sickening violation of trust. Ramesh was arrested on charges of raping a 16-year-old Scheduled Tribe girl who he had taken to Hyderabad with her parents’ permission on the assurance that he would take care of her education. He raped her several times over the next few days, returned with her to Gosavedu, and assaulted her again. The girl’s father reported the matter to the police.

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“Sex is the only way they get a high,” observes Mitra, who has a close understanding of the phenomenon. Victims do resist the advances of godmen, but they often do not even realise when a red line of violation has been crossed. No consent is either sought or obtained, since rape is packaged as a healing process or some other form of blessing. The Briton who was raped about seven times over a span of ten days by a yoga guru in Haridwar smelt a rat when he told her that she would have to sleep with other preachers at the ashram for the upliftment of her soul.

According to Mitra, ill-intended commune activities tend to dismantle those aspects of victims’ personalities by which they invoke individual choices. This blurs their instinct of self-preservation, leaving them vulnerable and emotionally dependent on the godman. “The collective sessions are hypnotic in nature,” says Mitra, “and they make your previous self dissolve in the collective... This gives [victims] a sense of liberty because they are detached from their past—a cause of stress and indignation in their lives. But this liberty is laced with vulnerability.”

Having observed godmen, Mitra points out some common aspects of their behaviour and psyche. For example, by raising their arms and spreading them wide while facing their followers, they adopt a posture that gives them a sense of power. They have usually had difficult childhoods, been exposed to scriptures and spirituality early in life (impressing onlookers), and are typically rebellious attention-seekers as a personality type.

The sad part is how often they get away with their exploitation of devotees. Many victims do not lodge complaints, says Mitra, as they are ashamed of how they allowed it to happen in the first place. In the broader social context, Srivastava speaks of a need for people to anchor themselves firmly against insecurities caused by rapid changes in the environment and economy. Godmen sometimes give followers a moral blanket of security that helps restrain their consumerist streak. It is a notional shelter that need not be as safe as they suppose. Srivastava also says that Indian and Western nirvana seekers differ in their attitudes to sexuality. In India, he says, the faculties that “question hierarchies” remain stunted. Also, rape here is seen as defilement of a woman’s body. In the West, ever since the alternative movements of the 1960s, rebels against the strict sexual norms of Christianity have looked towards India as a relaxed place where sex is seen as ennobling, as part of a spiritual quest.

“In Goa, they do it openly: sex, drugs and spiritualism is one wholesome package,” says a 43-year-old Russian painter who spends three months in Goa every year and has visited dozens of ashrams and retreats in India. “Many ashrams in Varanasi do the same,” she says, bemused, “but never acknowledge it as carnal.”

Such godmen thrive on cult support, of which they have found plenty overseas, says J. The Western youth of the 1960s and 70s were experimental, she says, and since they were rebellious and did not know what they wanted, they saw deviant lifestyles as profound. This demand drew legions of godmen of all descriptions, all of them holding aloft the prospect of a better life by blurring the line between carnal and spiritual pursuits. "These two worlds merge," says J. One day, she promises, she will write a book about how ungodly these godmen are.

Courtesy: <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/the-sex-lives-of-godmen>



Retrograde Movement, Shani Dosham, Mangliks and Science

V Raghunathan

Imagine that you are ensconced comfortably in a luxury car, stuck in traffic, when your car begins to slide forward ever so gently, without your realising it. The movement is so smooth that you are convinced your car is still stationary. In this state, as your car moves past the adjacent car, you could swear that the other car is moving gently backward. Alternatively, when the other car moves forward, you panic, thinking yours is sliding backwards. This is a phenomenon we also experience from time to time on railway platforms, when imagining our own carriage to be stationary on the platform, we assume the adjacent train to be moving in the reverse direction, when actually it is our train that is moving forward.

In ancient times, when the universe was believed to be geocentric, as the earth approached the outer planets (more distant from the sun than earth) in its journey around the sun, some of them seemed to be moving towards us. These planets were dubbed 'retrograde'. In reality, as we know today, the apparent or relative backward motion of that distant planet through space was caused by the simple fact of the earth moving faster in its orbit around the sun than the outer planet.

In the limited understanding of those times-that planets must move forward in the normal course of business-a planet moving backward must surely portend some evil. So, such movement was conventionally thought to be inauspicious, as it went counter to the 'natural' order of forward movement. And thus, for example, evolved the folklore of the wicked Shani, or Shani dosham, embodied in the retrograde movement of Saturn. Nonetheless, a retrograde planet causing some consternation to an ancient society may be quite acceptable, given the simplistic view of the universe at that time.

Mangal dosham-supposedly an astrological amalgamation of planets that occurs if Mars is in the second, fourth, seventh, eighth or twelfth house of the ascendant chart of Vedic astrology-involves the

same problem. In most parts of India, a person born during this combination of stars is called a manglik. Being a manglik, like smoking, is considered injurious to the health-nay, the very life-of the spouse of the person, or, at the very least, to their matrimonial life. Apparently this is ascribed to the 'fiery' nature of Mars. Thanks to this belief, it is not unusual to find people (more often women) who remain unmarried till late into life.

The belief, once again, may be perfectly acceptable in a primitive society with a primitive understanding of the nature of the planets. In those times (as even today), having pronounced mortal danger for those unfortunate enough to be born under unfavourable stars, the priests and sages couldn't simply throw away their powers over the masses. After all, if they were the intermediaries between gods and the masses, they also had to suggest solutions. A solution, if any, would also reassure the masses that all wasn't lost, since help was on hand thanks to the priests. These priests gave birth to another belief: the 'fault' in a marriage in which the woman was a manglik could be corrected if she was first married off to a sacred peepul tree (*ficus religiosa*), banana tree or a silver or golden idol of Lord Vishnu-a practice called kumbh vivah. With the ire of Mars unleashed on the tree or the idol, the woman was now safe and could marry a mortal man. The system continues to this day.

Clearly, for the ancient sages, when science or scientific methods were thousands of years away, the challenges of establishing why a distant planet should cause marital disharmony on planet earth or how the antidote of kumbh vivah could neutralize the evil effect of Mars were unnecessary complications. In the present day, these have grown into beliefs, or parts of our heritage and culture, not to be questioned.

The sages at the time showed the same implicit faith in these beliefs that Aristotle did when he declared that women had fewer teeth than men. Just as it never occurred to Aristotle to line up a few men and women, have them open their mouths, count their teeth and compute an average for the two sexes, it never occurs to our society to investigate such misplaced beliefs by employing a dash of scientific temper, by following up on the lives of, say, fifty random manglik marriages to investigate if any systematic danger to life and limb accrued to the relevant spouse.

The real issue is not so much that people in their inertia continue to believe in such mumbo jumbo. The more important issue is why very few social or religious institutions come forward to free religion from ancient dogmas, given the twenty-first-century knowledge of the universe about a so-called retrograde planet, or why we do not have many more studies and public discussions on the observed absence of correlation between being a manglik and marital disharmony.

*Excerpted from Chapter 6, Ganesha on the Dashboard (Penguin India, 2010).



So called Accurate Predictions Failed!

Prabhakar Nanawaty

Prior to actual voting of Parliamentary Election 2014, Shri Nandkishor Jakatdar, President Brihan-Maharashtra Jotish Mandal held a press conference on 5 Apr 2014. During the press conference he boasted that he and experts in his organization had studied 4000 horoscopes of candidates of various parties contesting the election and arrived at a few definite outcome of the election. correct

Here is a table showing the predictions, election outcome and the inferences arrived at.

	Prediction	Election Result	Inference
1	Narendra Modi will not be next Prime Minister		Wrong
2	No party will have absolute majority	BJP 282 MPs	Wrong
3	Without the assistance of Indian National Congress Party there will not be any Government	NDA with 334+ MPs	Wrong
4	BJP: 155 -165 seats	282 Seats	Wrong
5	Indian National Congress: 115 – 126 seats	44 seats	Wrong
6	Nationalist Congress Party: 8-10 seats	6 seats	Wrong
7	Shivsena: 10-12 seats	18 seats	Wrong
8	Samajwadi Party: 18-22 seats	5 seats	Wrong
9	Bahujan Samajwadi Party: 16-18 seats	0 seats	Wrong
10	In Maharashtra there will be same situation as was in the last (2009) election		Wrong
11	No future for Aam Aadmi Party		Correct
12	Narendra Modi will win from both - Vadodara and Varanasi - constituencies		Correct
13	Modi will have tough fight against Aravind Kejariwal of AAP and will win with marginal votes	Difference: 371784 votes	Wrong
14	No celebrity contesting in Maharashtra will win		Correct
15	Vishwajit Kadam from Pune will have a tough fight with Anil Shirole	Kadam lost with 315769 votes	Wrong
16	Vishwajit Kadam will win		Wrong
17	All Congress Party candidates in Mumbai will win		Wrong
18	Laxman Jagtap from Maval constituency will win	Shri Barne won	wrong
19	Shivajirao Adhalarao will win from Shirur constituency		Correct
20	Nitin Gadkari will win Nagpur seat just with 5 – 10 thousand more votes than his opposite candidate	Difference: 284828	Wrong
21	The next Government may survive hardly 2 – 3 years	Wait and see	
22	The Government coming after that election will survive for 5 years	Wait and see	

For 21st and 22nd predictions, we will have to wait and see. However out of remaining 20 predictions only 4 came true! More ever the predictions were nowhere near the actual results. The prediction of Narendra Modi will not become Prime Minister is the greatest blunder made by this team of Astrologers. BJP will not have absolute majority is also one more blunder.

Based on the above inferences one can assume that astrology is fooling the common people with its pseudo-scientific blaw blaw!



Astrology Flops Again!

Narendra Nayak

We have been inviting all those who claim supernatural powers of prediction to come forward and show their efficiency but forecasting the results for the elections from many decades. The elections of 2014 are the most interesting ones and most important from the point of view of the nation. We would like to test the acumen of these innumerable such claimants from all corners of this country and hence have put forward this offer of one million Indian rupees to those who can correctly predict the results of the elections of 2014 within the limits of accuracy and the conditions specified herein.

Predictions are needed for the following:

1. Who will be the next Prime Minister of India?
2. Which party or combination of parties will come to power? (if it is an alliance details of the constituents has to be provided)

Number of seats which will be won by each party within an error margin of + 5% (ranges are not acceptable).

3. Bharatiya Janatha Party
4. Indian National Congress.
5. Trinamool congress.
6. Bahujan Samajwadi Party.
7. Samajwadi party
8. ADMK
9. DMK
10. Janata Dal (U)
11. Janta Dal(secular)

12.CPI(M)

13. AAP

The number of votes that will be obtained by the following candidates within an error margin of + 5%
(ranges are not acceptable)

14.Narendra Modi at Varanasi

15.Rahul Gandhi at Amethi

16.Aravind Kejriwal at Varanasi

17.B.Janardhan Poojary at Mangalore

18.L K,Advani at Gandhi Nagar

19.Murali Manohar Joshi at Lucknow.

20. Sonia Gandhi at Rai Bareli.

Those whose entries shall be all correct within a range of 5% margin that is 19 answers right out of the 20 shall be eligible for the prize of rupees ten lakhs. In case of more than one entry being correct, the prize amount shall be equally distributed among the right entrants.

If no answers are received within the specified ranges the prize money will be retained by us.

I had made a prediction when we put forward our challenges to astrologers and all those who possess supernatural powers of prediction to forecast the results of the elections of 2014 – I had said whoever may win or lose but astrology will be a flop and I am glad that my prediction has come true again! We had posed twenty questions to them to predict the results including a googly like how many votes is Murali Manohar Joshi going to win at Lucknow while he is actually contesting from Kanpur! Many had fallen into that trap and had predicted votes for him! But, of course some have got the answer right by saying zero as he is not contesting from there! We have received about 115 or so from all corners of the country and also one from Singapore. Some of them are in Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu though we had specified that they should be in English only.

Well we have had people predicting based astrology, palmistry, face reading, pendulum reading and a variety of such and also those saying that we are not astrologers but are predicting based on our assessment of the situation. As usual a non astrologer Mr. Srinath from Bangalore had made the best predictions and his eight answers are right out of twenty .This of course does not mean that he will be getting our ten lakhs as we have specified a qualifying bar of nineteen right out of twenty! By hindsight I can say that we could have even given them a 50:50 chance! One person from Kerala had based his prediction that UPA will win as his late father had appeared in his dreams wearing a dhoti with a tri colour border!

There was even one from Hyderabad who had made his predictions based on a number of 'sciences' like astrology, face reading and such submitting his entry which was supposed to be opened only on the 16th after counting had started! When we did that, I found that he had given a range (which is not allowed) of 280 to 300 seats for BJP which was one of the few near the mark! Any way he had not answered other questions and hence was allotted only 1 mark out of 20! Most of the astrologers have got 2 to 4 answers right out of the twenty and have flopped miserably as to be expected!

Most of the predictions have come true about the next govt. and the next prime minister though we have had predictions about L.K.Advani, Sushma Swaraj, Aravind Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi and A.K.Antony as the next incumbents! So, I retain my hard earned money and will wait for the next elections to come around for the next astrology challenge! For those who are interested, the entries are with me and can be checked by prior appointment.



Schools are not Battlegrounds for Religions!

Babu Gogineni

I received today a communication on FB, shrieking that it was unjust for the authorities to consider suspension of a teacher who made students shout 'Jai Shri Ram' or 'Hail Lord Rama' in school. Was it Shri Ram or Jesus Christ that was born in India, it demands angrily. Can I not praise my Lord Rama in my own country, it wails. Does Bharat i.e. India belong to Hindus or to the westerners, it asks mindlessly. How dare they make Hindu children sing Christian prayers in Missionary Schools, it asks correctly. Pointing out that almost all Missionary schools in India ban girl pupils from wearing the bindi on the forehead and bangles on hands, it asks for banning of Christian Missionary Schools for violation of children's rights.

Education Is Preparation for Society

A school must be a place where freedoms are nourished. Children in school must be allowed to grow by learning about everything appropriate to their age; they must be taught to develop their critical thinking and they must be prepared for future responsible roles in a complex society. Education is preparation for society and for improving the self and society.

Children should be taught about religion in social studies and history classes, just as they are taught other subjects. This means knowledge about religion, and does not mean that they have to pray or follow any religious rituals. They should not be forced to practice any religion. No one should preach any religion in any school, nor should atheism be preached or taught. These are really adult matters. Nor should the subjects being taught be influenced by religion or atheism. Neither biology, nor moral science.

Schools are for Education, Not Indoctrination

Schools are institutions where knowledge is acquired, and where children learn to collaborate with each other. Schools are for education, not indoctrination. Here is where pupils should learn about Human Rights. Here is where they should understand civilisation and its achievements. The modern school is one of them and the foundation for a healthy society. Please stay off the schools, and do not send messages like this which make people misunderstand the purpose of education. Schools are not battle grounds for religions.

No Saraswati Puja, No Namaaz, No Hosannas In School!

Even though religion is too serious and complex a subject for children, if it has to be introduced to them at all, then it should be at home, not at school, and by parents and not by teachers. This applies to Christian prayers as well as to Hindu prayers or any other religion's prayer. No teacher should be promoting any religion! It is not their job, and would even be against their service rules!

If praising Jesus Christ in the class room is wrong, then praising Shri Ram is equally wrong! There should not be either Saraswati Puja nor should there be Christian prayers or Namaaz in schools. It is not about religious liberty - it is just that religion does not belong to the class room.

The law does not allow that at all in any government or fully government- aided schools in any case. Private schools could also adopt this best practice. Minority schools cannot coerce anyone to participate in prayer or in ritual. It is immoral and illegal. India Does Not Belong To The Hindus But of one thing we must be very clear - India does NOT belong to the Hindus or to other communities. She belongs to ALL her citizens who are individuals. Those of faith and those of none: citizens could be Hindus, Christians, Muslims or Humanists or Atheists. Our India also belongs to the world which has high expectations of high standards of democracy from her.

India has an ancient culture, but is also a new country which became an independent entity in 1947. The Republican Constitution came into effect in 1950 - it is the supreme law of the land. India was formed as a secular country, not as a Hindu country. It is blessed Pakistan which was created on the basis of religion while India was untainted by a religious identity and resolutely remained secular even after half a million Hindus and Muslims died in religious clashes during partition. Why are we losing our secularism in these more peaceful times?

A teacher is not a priest. A Hindu teacher cannot and should not teach Hinduism in school unless the subject of study is Hinduism. If that is the subject, the teaching should be academic. Propagating one's religion can be done in the Temple or Church or Mosque without any interference from anyone.

Secularism and Minority Rights

Appeasement of any section of society is against Secularism and damages the secular character of the country. In any case, Secularism is an integral part of the basic structure of India and cannot be changed. The Supreme Court of India is clear. You cannot say 'Jai Shri Ram' in the class room. You cannot sing praises to Jesus Christ in the class room in the US or in France or Belgium etc. either.

Minority rights are needed for groups to retain their identity and to conduct their activities. There are international standards for protecting the rights of minorities which Indian has a sovereign obligation to conform to. These rights are precious and are a test of that country's democracy - they are not really special rights for Muslims or Christians. Even language communities can be minorities - for example you can have a Telugu educational institution with minority status in New Delhi or a Marathi educational institution in Hyderabad. As an aside, do you know that many years ago Ramakrishna Math, established by the well-known Hindu monk Vivekananda, claimed Minority status saying Vivekananda established a separate religion? In 1995 the Supreme Court of India rejected their peculiar claims which were aimed at avoiding government control of their educational institutions. Nobody wants government interference, but minority rights are really about protection of identity.

All this does not mean that missionary schools should make children wear or not wear a particular style of dress. They have no right to do so. Any restrictions or dress codes should be within the guidelines of the Education department. And on this count, in many countries, children may not wear obviously religious dresses to school - the Islamic scarf or the Jewish kepi or the Christian cross. This is indeed tricky territory and not without controversy. For sure, the school can be a place where difference is celebrated, but that does not mean that officially there will be practice of religion by the teachers while discharging their duty.

Why Prayer at All?

Now, why do we need any religious prayer when children are anyway singing the National Anthem in school assemblies? Of course, even compulsory singing of National anthem has been challenged at the Supreme Court of India. In an important case, the teacher Sanjay Salve approached the High Court of Mumbai that he cannot sing a particular prayer because the prayer said all were children of God whereas he was the child of his parents! The court recently accepted he had a right not to say the prayer at school.

In any case, why not discuss the lives and thoughts of famous and important thinkers both religious and non religious in assemblies and in moral science classes? That would contribute more to social well being and nation building than bringing in religion which continues to divide people in the country.



'Promote Scientific Temper'

Interview with G. Vijayam of Atheist Centre, Vijayawada.

Ramesh Susarla

The foundations of the rationalist movement in Andhra Pradesh were laid by Kumaragiri Vema Reddy, popularly known as Vemana, through his verses in popular, everyday Telugu. The Atheist Centre is a social change institution founded by Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, popularly known as Gora, (1902-75), and Saraswathi Gora (1912-2006) in 1940 at Mudunur village in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. On the eve of Independence in 1947, the centre was shifted to Vijayawada and since then it has been the hub of activity for promotion of atheism, humanism and social change. Here are excerpts from an interview with the centre's executive director, G. Vijayam, son of Gora:

Who were the founders of the rationalist movement?

The history of the humanist or rationalist movement in the State can be traced back to the writer-poet Gurajada Venkata Appa Rao and the social reformer Kandukuri Veerasalingam Pantulu in the 19th century. When orthodoxy in society reached its pinnacle, rationalism was given shape by the early social reformers through literature. Veerasalingam is considered to have brought about a renaissance in Telugu literature. The playwright Tripuraneni Ramaswamy was yet another reformer who used his literary sword to propagate rationalism.

What did the rationalist movement aim to do?

Rationalists tried to end some of the social practices such as child marriage and introduced widow re-marriage, and some British utilitarians such as Arthur Cotton believed in maximising the good in society. Unlike Tamil Nadu and some northern States, the zamindari system did not prevail in Andhra Pradesh. The prevalent ryotwari system did not help in the anti-Brahmanism movement in the State. The birth of the Justice Party was on an anti-Brahmin plank and the radical humanist M.N. Roy led the self-respect movements.

Rationalism also emanated from the nationalist movement of Mahatma Gandhi and eradication of poverty and alleviation of human suffering were the focus, in addition to achieving independence. Goparaju Ramachandra Rao, or Gora, had close association with Gandhiji and left the teaching profession to work among the 'untouchables', and in the Independence movement from 1939.

What is the significance of rationalism today?

These days people are academically literate and professionally competent, but fail to think rationally when it comes to their personal lives. They tend to believe in the superstitions or miracles of a few

self-proclaimed godmen and get cheated. What is needed is the promotion of scientific temper among people from their childhood.

What is the significance of the Buddha?

The Buddha, after enjoying all the luxuries, came out of the materialistic world to do some basic questioning and found answers for them. Rationalists also tend to do the same. However, these days professionals are treading the reverse path, falling prey to godmen by accepting whatever they say and by failing to ask them basic questions.

What is Gora's contribution?

Gora, who questioned the concept of God, had to leave his job as a botany professor once in 1933, and again in 1939 from the Hindu College at Machilipatnam for the same reason. He, along with my mother Saraswati Gora, started the world's first Atheist Centre in 1940 and organised the first World Atheist Conference, too. He went around the world between 1970 and 1974 propagating atheism as a positive way of life. He died while addressing an atheist meeting in 1975.

What is the ground-level work of the Atheist Centre?

We have been working on inculcating the scientific temper among children and people at large; Gora was the first atheist with a science background and he began questioning all social practices on a scientific basis. The centre organised magic shows for children, explaining the scientific principles behind the tricks. It even exposed to people the tricks used by godmen to produce articles from thin air.

What is your prescription for improving rational thinking?

The government should include lessons on rational thinking in the syllabi from the primary school level to the high school level, promote science exhibitions more extensively, encourage children to question the basics of scientific principles or anything happening around them in society.

The government should enact a law to ban miracle cure, put a stop on politicians going to godmen, make use of self-help groups to promote the scientific temper among rural folk and target the unorganised student community to curb superstition.

Courtesy: *Campaign against Superstition* ■

‘Matted hair isn’t sign of godliness’

Chaitraly Deshmukh

Despite living in twentieth century, we still fall pray to superstitions. Here is an example, where parents of a 16-year-old-girl wanted to surrender their girl to a temple, after she developed numerous

tangles in her hair after accidentally rubbing the dough against it. However, thanks to volunteers of Maharashtra Andhrashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS), the parents were convinced to untangle her hair.

Mitali (16) (name change to protect identity), is a school drop-out and is staying with her parents and a younger brother at Gokhale Nagar on Senapati Bapat road at Pune. For the last few days, she was being treated as god-woman. Just then, MANS volunteers came to her rescue. Milind Deshmukh state co-ordinator of MANS said, "This is a second such incident in three months. In earlier incident, a wife of a bank manager who had matted hair was being treated as god-woman and she was also helped by MANS. Now we came across this incident."

The tangles were noticed by her paternal aunt, who then proclaimed her to be a god-woman. The family had organised a function and had called 16 married women for lunch and also paid for various religious trips. The parents had plan to surrender her to a temple of a godness claiming that she is a god-woman.

Speaking to DNA, Mitali recalls, "After my paternal aunt noticed my matted hair, she started calling me a god-woman. I was not aware about it. My parent also started following her belief. Initially I liked the fact that every one calling me a god-woman, but later my parents started putting several instruction on me, like preventing me from combing hair, not allowing me to eat non-veg food, not to sleep during the day. Later my friends had also stopped playing with me. Due to all this, I dropped out from school and started making Papad at home."

However, the situation changed, when her teacher Priya Nighojkar approached Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS) secretary Nandini Jadhav and Shriram Lalwani, who then approached her parents. After counseling, they were convinced to untangle her hair.

"On Friday, we cut a piece of hair and put it in water. The parents noticed that it was dough from the papad that she used to make. She had the habit of touching her hair with her fingers, due to which they were getting tangled," MANS members said

Courtesy: DNA



Self-style godman arrested for duping woman

Pune: Despite spending lakhs of rupees on pujas and medicines for the last five years, when a Pimpri-based woman could not conceive, she approached the cops against the self-styled godman, on Monday. The police have arrested the 'baba' under the relevant sections of Indian Penal Code. The complaint was registered by the victim with the help of Maharashtra Andhrashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS).

The arrested godman has been identified as Dipak Shirumal Motwani alias Paramanand Swami Dnyandipak (38), a resident of Pimpri. He claimed himself as 'Sai Avatar' and chants 'Arji meri, Marji Uski' (I pray, Lord wish). State Co-ordinator of MANS Milind Deshmukh said, "The citizen approached us against the godman and after checking the reality we approached the police. But some local goons and political person started calling up police pressurising them not to take the case." B B Mudiraj, inspector in-charge of Pimpri police station said, "We got some call claiming that he is god and many people have got benefited."

Assistant police inspector S B Patil of Pimpri police, who is investigating the case said, "The arrested godman Dipak was running garment and vegetable business and later he claimed that he went for meditation camp. From past ten years he is running a temple in his house and pose himself as Sai and Lord Krishna."

On Tuesday, he was produced before the court of judicial magistrate (First class) and has been remanded to police custody for two days.

Courtesy: DNA



Richard Dawkins on Fairy Tales

Ian Johnston

Professor Richard Dawkins has questioned whether telling children fairy tales could be harmful because they "inculcate a view of the world which includes supernaturalism".

The evolutionary biologist, a leading atheist and author of books including *The Selfish Gene* and *The God Delusion*, told an audience at the Cheltenham Science Festival that he stopped believing in religion when he was about eight after having seen through Santa Claus when he was just 21 months old.

He suggested children should be taught scientific rigour from an early age.

"Is it a good thing to go along with the fantasies of childhood, magical as they are? Or should we be fostering a spirit of scepticism?" *the Daily Telegraph* quotes him as saying.

"I think it's rather pernicious to inculcate into a child a view of the world which includes supernaturalism – we get enough of that anyway.

"Even fairy tales, the ones we all love, with wizards or princesses turning into frogs or whatever it was.

There's a very interesting reason why a prince could not turn into a frog – it's statistically too improbable."

After facing somewhat of a backlash over claims that Professor Dawkins had implied the stories themselves were harmful, he clarified his remarks on Twitter, saying that his initial raising of the question had been taken out of context.

"It IS pernicious to inculcate supernaturalism into a child," he posted on the social networking site. "But DO fairytales do that? It's an interesting Q. The answer is probably no."

"Hello, this is Richard Dawkins & I've no more to say on fairytales.' Turned out he wanted to talk about ethics. Startled me into agreeing," he tweeted later on.

Professor Dawkins said his mother had written down an early encounter with Santa.

"There was a man called Sam who came as Father Christmas, all 'ho ho ho'. All the children were enthralled by this. Then he left, I piped up much to the consternation of the adults, 'Sam's gone,'" he said. His religious belief lasted a bit longer. "I think I did believe it up to the age of eight or nine, when preachers said if you really, really pray for something it can happen. Even moving mountains, I believed it could really happen," he said. "I grew up. I put away childish things."

He said it would be "a bit strong" to say parents who raised their children to believe in God were guilty of child abuse.

But he added: "When you tell a child to mind their Ps and Qs otherwise they'll roast in hell, then that is tantamount to child abuse."

Professor Dawkins also talked about being sexually abused at his prep school in Salisbury. He has previously played down an incident in which a teacher "put his hand inside my shorts".

"I got quite a bit of stick for saying that it did not have a big impact but to say that it did would be an indecency to those people whose lives have been ruined by experiences that have been much worse," he said.

Courtesy: The Independent



The Disturbing Psychological Impact of Superstitions on Children

Jenni Wallis

The world still has its handful of superstitions and mystical, pre-Enlightenment religious beliefs do still hold sway in society. In some Asian cultures the vast number and the disturbing depth of superstitions that dominate can often paralyze the lives of locals and lead to severe anxiety. In Bangladesh, for instance, *tabeej* (or voodoo dolls) can be used to spark fear in others and to incite hate, and these have been known to leave deep emotional and psychological scars on those who are targeted in this manner. (1) In the underdeveloped regions of the world (and especially among those living in poverty), what is known as black magic still runs deep, even though there is absolutely no scientific evidence that could bolster any of their beliefs and claims. (2) Superstitions and anti-modern religious beliefs can have devastating psychological and medical consequences, especially on the youth.

Brainwashing Children in 21st Century America

A few years ago, the broader public got a unique opportunity to see how fundamentalist Christian groups go about brainwashing children in the world's most developed country. What many people perhaps assumed could not possibly exist in the 21st century western world not only occurred, but did so without the intervention of child services, even though these fundamentalist youth camps engaged in a form of psychological child abuse. The guiding principle of Jesus Camp is stark and clear: "We believe that there's two kinds of people in this world: people who love Jesus and people who don't." . This "us vs. them" mentality opens the doors to fear and paranoia of "the other" and, ultimately, justifies violence, as camp counselors refer to the struggle between these two types of people as a veritable war.

Religion and a Tradition of Child Abuse

Child abuse -- psychological, physical and sexual -- is one of the threads that links together vastly different religious groups. Most recently, for instance, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect called Lev Tahor fled authorities in the Canadian province of Quebec after local child services officials noted that they intended to put the religious colony's underaged members in foster care. It was discovered that the cult's children were shockingly malnourished, lived in filth and showed signs of physical abuse. A total of 120 children fell victim to the mad beliefs of this sect in Quebec's Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts community, where local officials found that kids were drugged by the sect's leaders with melatonin, because they believed that this was the best way to control their behavior. Equally troubling was that girls were required to marry by age 14 and boys who disobeyed authorities were tortured with wire hangers. These stories echo the poor treatment of children on other fundamentalist religious communities, most notably perhaps in the polygamist

Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a radical off-shoot of the Mormons. As early as 1953, American child welfare authorities had to step in and remove hundreds of children who had been mentally or physically abused.

The Consequences of a Brainwashed Childhood

History is full of examples of what has happened to promising children after extended periods of brainwashing and psychological abuse at the hands of religious organizations. In some parts of India, a belief in so-called "faith healing" often results in criminal neglect of children and the dismissal of essential medical treatments. Even more disturbing is the fact that in some communities in India, skin branding and body modification are still practiced and children end up being the victims of this cruel practice. Not only does this result in permanent scarring, but leads some brainwashed parents to think that by doing this to their children, they can avoid proper treatment by doctors. These are the types of traumatic, scarring childhood experiences that can lead to drug and alcohol addictions in adulthood, as well as serious mental illness, many of which go undiagnosed and untreated. Specialists believe that 45% of mental illnesses are left untreated and those who have had traumatic childhood experiences are more likely to fall into this category.

Anti-Modern superstitions and religious practices should not be seen as quaint, harmless relics of the past. They have the ability to cause real damage, especially among the most vulnerable members of our society.

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Dabholkar, Dissent and Democracy

Priyanka Kakodkar

At 7.20 a.m. on August 20, 2014, supporters of the courageous and gritty rationalist Narendra Dabholkar will gather near the Omkareshwar Temple in Pune, where he was gunned down while on a morning walk exactly a year ago. Through street plays and songs, anti-superstition campaigners will pay tribute to one of India's foremost critics of charlatan godmen and black magic. The tribute will also be an indictment of the government's utter failure to find his killers. Dr. Dabholkar's daylight murder was initially probed by the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party government in Maharashtra and then transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). So far it has yielded nothing. Ironically, a month ago, *Outlook* magazine ran an investigation claiming that the Pune police had resorted to planchet and tantriks to trace the killers of the very man who had opposed such forces all his life. The police have denied this and have even threatened a defamation case.

However, there is widespread disillusionment with both the Centre and the State's inability to push the probe. "It is very distressing. We are hurt and anguished. Are they trying to hide something and shield someone?" asks his son Hamid Dabholkar. "There were groups which had consistently been attacking and defaming him. They had filed many cases against him. The investigation should have focussed on that," he emphasises.

Dabholkar's legacy

Dr. Dabholkar was both fearless and relentless in his single-minded drive against blind faith. He had braved vilification and death threats, even physical attacks. His programmes were routinely disrupted. Yet, he continued to challenge godmen, often on their own turf surrounded by mobs of followers. His targets included the influential Sathya Sai Baba and his claims of producing "miracle ash" out of thin air.

In the late 1990s, Dr. Dabholkar had taken on Ratnagiri's Narendra Maharaj at his own ashram. The godman, who claimed miracle cures for ailments, arrived with 20,000 followers for a tense face-off with Dr. Dabholkar and his group of 15. Narendra Maharaj finally conceded defeat after a debate monitored by an anxious District Collector.

In 2000, Dr. Dabholkar led a massive campaign demanding the entry of women into the Shani Shingnapur temple trust in Ahmednagar. The issue finally ended up in court.

Hindu right-wing groups were among his fiercest critics, mainly the Hindu Janjagruti Samiti and Sanatan Sanstha. Both organisations have vehemently denied any hand in his murder. However, the Sanatan Sanstha proclaimed in an editorial just a day after the murder that it was "God's wish." One member of the organisation was briefly questioned by the police before being let off for lack of evidence.

Dr. Dabholkar's greatest victory — a law against superstition and black magic — came posthumously, after a dogged 18-year struggle. One day after he was killed, the Maharashtra government cleared an ordinance, and in December 2013, a law against superstitious practices. The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, 2013 is a diluted version of the ambitious draft Dr. Dabholkar had championed. It does not allow third parties to lodge complaints. Only the affected party has that right.

However, the law has already had a massive impact with nearly 80 cases being registered across the State in less than a year. These include cases against human sacrifice, the sexual exploitation of women by local godmen and the fleecing of the gullible by promises of instant wealth. However, the cases have mostly come to the Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (ANS) set up by Dr. Dabholkar and then been registered with the police.

"In the last year, we have received nearly one such complaint daily," says ANS working president Avinash Patil. The survival of the organisation, founded nearly three decades ago, has been critical to continuing his campaign.

The deceptively gentle activist had built a robust movement across all the districts in the State, drawing on students and volunteers to propel the battle against superstition. Even today, ANS has nearly 250 branches and 5,000 volunteers. "Sustaining the organisation was a challenge. With his death we lost our security cover. But we have survived and passed the test," says Mr. Patil.

The perils of activism

Dr. Dabholkar was well aware of the risks he faced by questioning obscurantism in a country steeped in superstition. "In this movement, even expressing a thought is sometimes a fight," he would say. Indian rationalists have long walked a vulnerable path, even though under our "Fundamental Duties", citizens are obliged to "develop a scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform." Yet it's not only rationalists who have the odds stacked against them. Whistle-blowers who have exposed corruption, now increasingly through the Right to Information (RTI) Act, have been targeted, sometimes paying with their lives.

Close to Pune city itself, RTI activist Satish Shetty was murdered in 2010. Last week the CBI filed a closure report in the case saying it had not found evidence against any of those accused of his murder. The probe into his father's killing, Hamid Dabholkar feels, fits into this larger pattern.

"This is an issue which goes beyond my father. If voices which stand for social causes are silenced and no action is taken against the perpetrators, it is an attack on democracy," he says. And on simple rational thinking itself.

Courtesy: *The Hindu*



One year on, many Dabholkars emerge

Aritra Bhattacharya

Every time a play ended-sometimes in the middle of it too-the 1500-plus people present at the Manohar Mangal Karyalay in Pune burst into applause. Gathered here for a programme to mark the first death anniversary of rationalist and anti-superstition activist Narendra Dabholkar, they required no goading; no announcements saying "Please give them a big hand" or "Put your hands together for...".

Dabholkar was murdered on this day by right wing Hindutva forces, not far from where people had gathered to witness the 20-odd plays against superstition. Despite the CBI having taken over investigation into the case two-and-a-half months ago, there has been no headway. This day then, was also a day of 'nishedh' of the state for Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmoolan Samiti (MANS), with which Dabholkar was attached. Programmes to mark the day were held across 36 districts of Maharashtra by MANS activists, who sought to iterate the fact that although 'they' had managed to kill Dabholkar, 'they' had not been able to 'kill' his views and rationalist thinking in general.

This was borne out by the gathering at Manohar Mangal Karyalay; although people trooped in and out of the hall, not a seat was vacant, and many watched the plays, spread over six hours, standing in the aisles and corners. Around 250 students and MANS activists had worked on the plays, each of which showcased how people were being misled by superstition and those propagating such views for their own benefit.

For instance, a play on a godman showed how he was trying to extort money by fooling people with gem stones; when he tried to solicit a young woman 'bhakt', local activists handed him over to police. The policemen, however, were only too keen to know their future and promotion prospects and started being subservient to him. A chance visit by an activist to the police station revealed this; the activist then called the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) and threatened to hit the streets if the godman was not prosecuted.

MANS activists, in reality, have often hit the streets to demand proper investigation into Dabholkar's murder. Hamid Dabholkar, the deceased rationalist's son, who was present at the venue, said, "The government is treating this like any other murder case. The attack on 'doctor' (as Dabholkar was fondly known) was an attack on rationalist thinking and on democracy. But the state does not seem to be bothered." Omei Sathe, a student from Satara, said the government was not doing enough to inform citizens about the anti-superstition law put in place in the state after Dabholkar's death. His group presented a play looking at the contours of this law, telling people how they could use it. All the plays staged here were based on actual incidents that MANS activists had encountered across the state. Workshops were held in eight places, wherein MANS activists and students were familiarised

with the basics of street theatre by well-known actor and theatre person Atul Pethe. The plays, and the songs in them, were all written by those who were part of the group.

In the months ahead, each group plans to hold at least 100 shows of their play in their respective areas. Faruk Gavandi from Tasgaon in Sangli, a MANS activist since his school days and an actor in one of the plays, said the plays act as conversation starters. "We have done 2-3 shows of our play; while the play itself is 20 minutes long, conversations go on for over an hour," he noted.

In Manohar Mangal Karyalay though, the conversations happened outside the hall, where books on Dabholkar, the anti-superstition law, and justice and equity were being sold. Every now and then, one among those gathered there would look into a cut-out of Dabholkar—instead of the face, the cut-out had a mirror. In that moment of looking, the onlooker became Dabholkar. And the cut-out seemed to ask: How many Dabholkars can 'they' kill?

Courtesy: *The Statesman*



Exclusive investigation: Dabholkar Murder

Ashish Khetan

(Ten months after the killing of noted rationalist Narendra Dabholkar, we are none the wiser about his killers. Ashish Khetan visits Pune and Mumbai to reconstruct a near-perfect murder and a 'spirited' police investigation hits an absurd, irrational low.)

The Maharashtra Police is notorious for messing up critical crime investigations. Its supposedly premier agency—ATS or the Anti-Terror Squad—manufactured bogus evidence in the Malegaon bomb blasts, the 7/11 serial train explosions and the German Bakery terror case. They have also failed to solve RTI activist Satish Shetty's murder and the rape and killing of three minor girls in Bhandara—both of which cases are now with the CBI. But nothing prepares you for the investigation techniques—eventually all in vain, alas!—deployed by the Pune Police to solve the Dabholkar murder (this case too was transferred to the CBI in May this year by the Bombay High Court).

Dabholkar, a medical doctor-turned-social activist, devoted his whole life to promoting a scientific temperament and critical thinking, and campaigning against witchcraft, superstition and blind faith. On his death, Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan was constrained to compare the murder to Gandhi's assassination: "The forces of intolerance that killed Gandhi have also killed Dabholkar." But if the killing of Dabholkar meant a huge loss for the secular, liberal space in the country, the investigation

that followed into his murder is an affront to his legacy and everything that he stood for. Appallingly, to solve his murder, the Pune Police resorted to supernatural mumbo-jumbo and irrational faith, the very societal ill that Dabholkar fought against so valiantly, a fight that perhaps took his life.

Dabholkar was gunned down on August 20, 2013. And since their investigation was not yielding anything, the then Pune police commissioner Gulabrao Pol took the help of self-proclaimed spiritualists to communicate with Dabholkar's spirit and ask it for leads! These are acts that could well qualify as an offence as per the anti-superstition ordinance promulgated by the state government within just a week of Dabholkar's death and which became the Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act after it was passed by both houses of the state legislature in December 2013.

Just two or three months earlier, in September or October, Pol had even set up a 'crack team' trained in marshalling the spirits of the dead to invoke Dabholkar's. Retired assistant commissioner of police Ranjit Pandurang Abhyankar (decorated with the President's police medal), ex-police constable and now self-styled godman Manish Thakur, along with senior Crime Branch police inspectors and constables formed part of this team. They were given ample police resources, be it vehicles or secret service funds.

Thakur's task was to conduct a seance to summon Dabholkar's soul. He would light a candle, place a vessel of water and lie on a bed in an anteroom to the commissioner's office. What followed would make a worthy sequel to Aamir Khan's supernatural thriller *Talaash*.

Within minutes, Thakur's body would start shaking violently. It was an indication that Dabholkar's soul had now entered his body. Thakur's own soul, meanwhile, would travel for the time being to the water-filled vessel. (His own soul, in fact, was not his own either, he told me. It was of a Shiv Sena rioter he had shot dead in Jogeshwari during the 1992-93 Bombay riots. Thakur took voluntary retirement in 2014). Pol would then question Dabholkar's soul about his movements a day before the killing, the men he suspected to be behind his killing and the profile of those who shot him. Assisting the assembled in this task were 10-12 other spirits—both good and evil—who were always at his command during the 'investigation'. Senior Crime Branch officers would then act on the 'information' thus generated, pick up 'suspects' and interrogate them. They would eventually have to let them off in the absence of any prima facie evidence of their involvement. Pol commissioned many such seances in 2013.

Both Thakur and ex-ACP Abhyankar need little encouragement to share the outcomes of their 'questioning sessions' with the souls of Dabholkar and others, and the follow-up investigations the police duly carried out on their basis. "For two months," Abhyankar told me, "Pol sahib deputed us one senior inspector, two constables, one driver and a vehicle. We worked day and night and picked up suspects from Mumbai and Pune on the basis of the inputs given by the spirits. But detentions were not

converted into arrests. Pol sahib was worried what the police would tell the court, there was no concrete evidence.”

When I met Gulabrao Pol at his luxurious 100-acre farmhouse on the outskirts of Kolhapur city where he has been living since his voluntary retirement in March, he conceded Thakur would summon Dabholkar’s ‘soul’ in his presence and he would interact with it. “My first introduction to Thakur was through Mr Abhyankar (sic),” Pol told me. Abhyankar and he went back a long way, he said; “he was my sub-inspector during my first posting as acp in Pune.” And Thakur had helped Abhyankar solve some ‘tough’ cases of train robberies while he was the deputy superintendent (DySP) in the Railway Police, a fact Abhyankar himself confirmed. “Dada (an honorific Abhyankar uses for Thakur) helped me in solving cases of train robbery with the help of spirits,” he told me as he introduced me to Thakur at his residence in Premnagar Society, Pune. Abhyankar was awarded the President’s police medal in 2009 for distinguished service as DySP, Railway Police, a feat Abhyankar now credits to Thakur’s supernatural powers. Abhyankar retired from the force in 2012.

Pol confirmed that he put a substantial amount of manpower and logistics to Thakur and his team. “*Sab kuchh diya unko, gaadi diya, paisa diya, kahin bhi jao, inquiry karo, kuchh information mile to local police ko bolo, kuchh problem ho to mujhe bolo.* (I gave them everything, vehicles, money, freedom to go anywhere, make any inquiry. I asked them to share info with local cops and inform me if there was a problem). I would talk to the superintendent of police of the district concerned or commissioner of police or deputy commissioner.”

Eerily, Pol also recounted some of the ‘conversations’ he had with Dabholkar’s soul. It revealed, for instance, that he (Dabholkar) had visited the state secretariat (mantrayala) in Mumbai a day before he was killed, and that two persons were following him. One of them bumped into him as he was entering the mantralaya building. And Dabholkar’s spirit told him all this, I asked Pol. Yes, he confirmed. The two men then followed him to Dadar and got into the same bus as him. Had Dabholkar really gone to the mantralaya on the said day? “Yes,” Pol said. “That he came by bus was also right. He didn’t get off anywhere en route (to Pune). The man who was chasing him got off at a bus stop.”

However, assistant commissioner of police (Crime Branch), Rajendra Bhamare, who was the investigating officer before the case went to the CBI, refuted that Dabholkar had visited mantralaya. Pol’s faith in the theory remains unshaken only because it originates from Thakur.

Sufficiently intrigued at this point, I asked Thakur if he could set up a seance session between me and Dabholkar. I am invited to his safehouse near the railway station in Daund city, a one-and-a-half-hour drive away from Pune city. There were two people with him when I reached, but their problems were seemingly resolved after an incantation in Marathi and a blessing by hand. After they left, Thakur obliged me with what I had come for.

The home was furnished with expensive modern gadgets, a testament to his flourishing business. I was led to a room, where he lit a candle, and placed a vessel of water. He then proceeded to lie down on the bed, draped in a white sheet. I was instructed to hold a small stone, round and black, while he set about the business of summoning Dabholkar's soul. Shortly after, he started shaking violently. He calmed down, however, in less than a minute. Rising up from the bed, he told me, in Marathi, that he was Dr Dabholkar.

Dr Dabholkar's 'soul' repeated to me what it had 'told' the others before. That two men were following him as he entered mantralaya. He also named a few of the 'suspects', most of whom had already been interrogated at length by the Pune police and released for lack of evidence.

Not very conversant in Marathi, I decided to pose a few questions to Dr Dabholkar in English. However, though the man was proficient in English, Dr Dabholkar's soul could barely understand what I was saying. In fact, he even avoided speaking to me in Hindi and preferred to stick to his mother-tongue, Marathi. He did tell me the name of his son and daughter, and a few details of his life, nothing that a Wikipedia search would not throw up. You had to be blindly superstitious or utterly stupid to believe what you were seeing.

The pity is that an officer of the rank of a police commissioner chose to rely on Thakur's 'method' to investigate Dabholkar's murder, wasting critical time and crucial resources in the process. A senior inspector in the Crime Branch, who was part of the probe, told me that he and his team loathed the fact that they were made to act on Thakur's instructions, and whose continued presence there became a cause of much resentment.

However, Thakur isn't the only act in the bizarre sequence of events. Around 10 am on August 20, three hours after Dabholkar's murder, the Thane police had arrested two arms dealers—Manish Nagori and Vilas Khandelwal—in a completely unconnected case (though officially they were shown as being arrested on August 24). Both were known arms dealers and had been under observation for some time, their cellphones under interception. The duo were taken in police custody by several agencies, including the ATS and booked in a range of cases over the next five months. It was the turn of the Pune Crime Branch in the last week of January, as it booked them in the Dabholkar case on the basis of a match between the lead recovered from Dabholkar's body and a gun recovered from Nagori and his aide Khandelwal.

I asked Pol and Bhamare if they knew the killers since the gun had been found. They didn't. The only explanation Pol could offer was that the arrests were effected on the basis of a ballistic report by the state forensic science laboratory. "Under the Evidence Act, you cannot ignore an expert report," he told me. Both Nagori and Khandelwal walked out on bail in April. When we asked the present police commissioner Satish Mathur about it, "We have neither filed a chargesheet against them nor have we filed a discharge application. It is over to the CBI now."

Meanwhile, almost a whole year has been lost. Crucial leads have gone cold. The killers have had enough time to cover their tracks. Dabholkar's murder is a grievous assault on all those who believe in reason and tolerance, an attack on those who have faith in democratic and persuasive methods while battling for larger ideas. It is imperative that Dabholkar's killers are brought to book so that the conspiracy of hate and violence is uncovered. Fixing the accountability of people like Pol would be a good place to begin with.

Courtesy: *Outlook*



Supernatural Mumbo-Jumbo

It defies credulity that the Maharashtra Police have come to rely on supernatural mumbo-jumbo in the investigation of the murder of Dr. Narendra Dabholkar. It is particularly ironic in the context of the life-long mission of Dr Dabholkar which was dedicated to bringing about a society based on rationalism and the ideals of enlightenment.

It is distressing to learn that some members of the scientific community have defended the use of such unsubstantiated dubious methods in this very serious criminal investigation. Such methods would not be considered admissible in a court of law with the usual standards of evidence and they could hardly stand up to rigorous scientific scrutiny even at the most elementary level.

This stubborn hold of irrationality even among otherwise well-meaning individuals gives some idea about the difficulties faced by the rationalist movement and the Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti. One can only hope that perhaps it will strengthen the resolve of the members and well-wishers of ANiS to re-engage in this important struggle with a greater awareness of the challenges.

Atish Dabholkar



What is the Source of ANiS' Strength?

Suman Oak

Many Social Activists used to ask Dr. Dabholkar, "Your organization has spread to every nook and corner of Rural Maharashtra and attracts attention of the media with constantly ongoing innumerable activities; and yet how does it remain free of factionalism, casteism, indiscipline and many other ills like paucity of funds and shortage of workers?" This lengthy question requires a much lengthier answer to understand the source of ANiS' strengths that keep the movement thriving and flourishing.

ANiS' ideology is very different than that of other social organizations. It is not founded on any

economic, political platform or any religion or race. It is based on four principles that are put into practice in all its activities. They are:

- Eradication of all superstitions that enable exploitation of ignorant, gullible people,
- Instilling Scientific Outlook,
- Inculcating secular viewpoint and critical approach towards religion
- Engraining democratic human values and helping to bring about comprehensive social change.

Eradication of Superstition and Cause and Effect Relation:

Blind belief has caused many obstacles in human progress till man invented a new way of looking at happenings around him. Reason cleared his vision and illuminated the path of progress. It says - there is a cause behind all that exists or happens; human intellect can grasp this cause; some causes may not be discernible for a while but man now knows the way to find them and this is the most reliable way of acquiring and enhancing knowledge. This leads to the conviction that whatever happens in the life of a person - good or bad- is not the making of his fate or god, time of his or her birth or sins committed in the earlier births. There is always a cause behind the suffering of a person, his exploitation which can be diagnosed, established and remedied.

Scientific Outlook:

However when an attempt is made to draw attention to exploitative superstitions and the way to remedy them, even those at the receiving end of exploitation are startled and ask you, "Who gave you the right to make these abrupt changes in our lives?" and "does your science know everything?" To be able to answer such questions, the activist needs to understand the philosophy of social change that supports scientific outlook. Although it is not possible to remove all obstacles in the path of progress, one can certainly light the path and cautiously avoid the pitfalls. Past history tells us that man had to face such innumerable obstacles and pitfalls till the rationale of 'Scientific Outlook' struck him and lighted his path. The Polish Astronomer Copernicus proffered two theories; one that the earth and all planets revolve round the Sun and the second that the earth rotates on its own axis from east to west and completes a full rotation in one day. This overturned the cause-effect relation between the sun, the earth and the planets, as spelled out in the Bible. The Bible had said that all this is caused by the will of the Father in Heaven. People did not take notice of Copernicus' theories then. But when Bruno confirmed Copernican theory he was burnt alive and Galileo had to beg for pardon for experimentally confirming the truth. But their sacrifice proved to be the beginning of a new age of science. It enabled man to discard the Christian religious theories of god, providence, destiny or the Hindu theories of Praktan, Prarabhda, Karmavipak etc. For the first time man became independent of the Word, the Book and the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God controlling every thought and action of every human being. It gave man a new self assurance, and confidence.

Scientific Outlook blessed humanity with three more boons. In India women and Dalits were not allowed to acquire any knowledge. But this new way of thinking was available to all irrespective of caste, creed or gender. Secondly Science does not claim to possess answers to all questions and to know the ultimate truth, as do most religions. It keeps striving to reach the truth. Change becomes possible as you inch towards truth. Thirdly, Scientific Outlook is the only means or technique, available to mankind, to obtain valid knowledge. It is now accepted that whatever knowledge becomes accessible to mankind will be through Scientific Outlook and not revelation.

In simple words Scientific Outlook means believing anything to the extent of the evidence available for it.

Observation, reason, inference, verification and experiment are constituents of Scientific Outlook. Scientific Outlook is not a mere mathematical process. Its core contains values. Those values are modesty, independence, exactitude and fearlessness.

It is the duty of every Indian citizen to adopt the Scientific Outlook. Inculcating this outlook is mentioned as one of the core elements of education. It is also an important value that has to be inculcated in the minds of students in their school days. Moreover adopting and inculcating Scientific Outlook that helps eradication of superstitions is mandated by our constitution and National Education Policy.

Scientific Outlook can be defined as: any logical statement that can be universally validated by observation, examination, rigorous logic, mathematics, verification and experiment. This new outlook came into existence only 400 years ago. But it has completely changed mankind's outlook towards the whole universe. It is not just a mathematical process but has an intrinsic value system in it (as stated above) although practicing all those values in everyday life is very difficult for common people. Yet merely talking about rationalism, discussing ill effects of superstition, discarding or reforming age old traditions and customs also requires courage and can lead to confrontation. Anyone can do this much.

Scientific Outlook could not spread its roots deep into Indian soil although India did have a long tradition of independent thinkers who propounded their own theories. Indian intellectuals of the past conceived the idea of 'Zero' and the mathematics of the World progressed by leaps and bounds as a result. Nagarjun, a renowned chemist discovered how to make mercury compounds. Aryabhatta proffered the theory that the earth revolves around the sun, a thousand years earlier than Copernicus and Varahmihir knew ages before, that the sun is a star. Though this knowledge was derived from observation, investigation, exploration, scrutiny, discourse, use of elementary mathematics and the genius of those ancient scholars, it was yet not the Scientific Outlook as we see it today. There are reasons why this tradition disappeared without developing into the modern Scientific Outlook.

Such factors as the caste system, subordination of women, restriction on propagation of knowledge, prohibition of independent thinking, validity of and reverence for the word and the book

and negating dignity of labour stopped not only the spread of knowledge but also stopped rational free thought altogether. The 'Adwait' doctrine of identity of the human soul and the divine essence taught us that the emancipation of a human being lies in uniting one's soul with the divine essence (whatever it means!). The material world that we see and experience is Maya, not real but illusion. Our education system also discourages inquisitiveness. Asking questions, on the part of a student is seen as an affront to his teachers or elders. Idolization has become so rampant in our society that self respect is replaced by chauvinist pride and arrogance; criticism is impossible as it is construed as insult or abuse; because of intolerance and chauvinist tendencies, the individual and the society have become over sensitive and aggressive. To add to this, there are many religions, each with many sects and deities or hallowed saintly persons and the multitudes of their worshippers. Another and more important reason is the lack of political strength and will that can straighten out the fabric of our disorderly society. We are not prepared to give up obsolete, senseless and exploitative customs and traditions or even to re-examine them. Politicians reap the benefit of encouraging these orthodoxies and pandering to chauvinistic demands. Such atmosphere cannot promote Scientific Outlook.

Scientific Outlook is accused of not answering any questions regarding the existence of god or Atma (soul). These critics do not know what is meant by Scientific Outlook. Atma and other similar concepts are beyond the pale of human observation and experiment. That is why ANiS' stand is that of an agnostic. Moreover it believes that it is not possible for human beings to obtain any knowledge that is not accessible to observation and experiment. Another accusation is that common people are not capable of assimilating scientific outlook; they need the support of religion instead. This is not true. The common man believes in any phenomenon, incident or thing only to the extent he sees proof of its validity. In fact understanding scientific outlook is much easier than understanding any religious doctrines e.g. the doctrine of 'Praktan' or the Brahma. The third objection is that because of science, morality declines and indulgence increases. This too is not true for it is possible to be moral and evade indulgence without the aid of religion. ANiS believes that it is not religious tenets but reason that gives rise to morality. ANiS activists lead simple, unpretentious lives devoid of any addiction or indulgence. Religionists claim that religion does not mean religious rituals. Religion is the philosophy that is based on morality. Scientific Outlook too is not just mathematics. It is the cause-effect relationship - the reciprocal relationship that is revealed in the Biblical adage 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. Scientific Outlook gives your thinking a moral turn. As one adopts Scientific Outlook, he begins to question the accuracy and reliability of all the fancy concepts like magnet therapy, Reiki, Vastushastra astrology, revealing what is in store in the future as well as spiritual ideas like Moksha, Brahma, Parabrahma, Swarga, Atma, Paramatma, etc. and eventually discards them as useless and opposes them as they promote exploitation of the gullible.

Faith and Superstition:

ANiS does not want to oppose faith; they want to eradicate exploitative superstitions not faith. But it is sometimes difficult to distinguish faith from superstition. The increasing spread of Science and Education could not eradicate superstition. Superstitions change with respect to time and the individual. We can roughly say, 'That notion, of which 'the cause effect relation' has been indisputably established can be called conviction or trust; and the notion for which no 'cause effect relation' can be established and yet is believed to exist is superstition.'

ANiS activists are frequently asked 'where is the need for such a special drive for eradicating superstition? Will it not disappear as science and education spread? Darkness (meaning superstition) cannot be thrown out but a lighted candle will gradually help expel it. A petromax lamp will do the job better and when the day breaks the darkness will disappear altogether.' But what we experience is quite the opposite. An Indian or a Maharashtrian who is now supposed to be a modern, scientific and universal man, still believes in vows, penances, Karnee, Bhanamati, animal sacrifice and Narayan Nagbali. He argues that 'Baba-Buvas are surely perilous to the society and should be exposed. However the Baba who is my Guru is altogether of a different ilk. I deeply believe in Him and will not tolerate if anyone tries to do him any harm.' Thus superstitions change with respect to individuals. They also change with respect to time. Despite the anti-Sati law passed by Lord Bentinck in 1829 that still continues to exist in law books, women in India, even today, have to agitate for making that law more stringent. Even today a woman has to prove her chastity by putting her hands in boiling oil and remaining unscathed. In short whatever is utter foolishness is Superstition. Faith is accepting the existence of something for which no indisputably established evidence is available but at the same time, it is not contradictory to your values, involves you emotionally and drives you to act.

Narration of human Progress is history of examining Faith. Yet no one likes that his faith be examined. The force of reason that drives a person to earnest action is faith. Such faith as defined by Justice Ranade has three components. a) earnestness- meaning decision taken by emotion and not intellect. b) With the force of faith, intention should be converted into action which requires conquering fear and allurements. c) That which enhances value judgment is Faith and that which degrades it is superstition. Faith should not refuse any examination on the basis of Truth. Obsession with one's faith should not become an obstacle in the practice of others' faiths. It means that which disregards the principle of non-violence is superstition.

Four centuries after Bruno was burnt alive and Galileo was made to apologize for experimentally proving the facts of Earth's rotation and revolution, the Pope had to beg for pardon. Since then the right of Scientific Outlook, in the field of knowledge, to discover and pronounce what is truth and what is not, was indisputably established. This is an example of eradicating superstition. Superstition is fossilised, pious ignorance of gullible pious people that assures them emotional protection, but at the same time

promotes their exploitation. Science knows for sure that the genome patterns of all human beings are much too similar and there are only four blood groups. But this fact cannot make an iota of change in the caste system prevailing in our country. Everyone thinks that his caste is superior to and more pious than all other castes and seeks protection in it. This psyche sustains the caste system that exploits people at many levels. ANiS fights against caste system by promoting inter-caste and inter-religion marriages.

Justice Ranade's definition of Faith as *the force of reason that drives a person to earnest action*, needs a little explanation. An individual does not live solely by his intellect but needs emotional earnestness to help him take decisions and act on them. Emotion hastens decision and leads to quick action. This is deemed to be the strength of his faith. But here it is important to remind oneself of the third point of this definition, viz. *that which enhances value judgment is faith and that which degrades it is superstition*. E.g. driving the British out of this country and obtaining freedom was a subject of Faith for the freedom fighters. There was *earnestness* and they had overcome *fear and allurements* also. But one has to examine whether the third condition regarding value judgment is fulfilled. E.g. to judge the fight against the British rule, we have to ask: Would it have been reasonable to shoot every British man in our country? To whom should the British have handed over the power? Why do we want freedom? These questions can be answered intellectually as: we fought against colonialism; British people are our friends; we wanted freedom not for restoring the old powers but for the progress of the common man. The freedom fighters decided to fight because of their faith in their leaders.

One more point needs to be discussed here. How can one determine whether a faith is ethical or not? This can be tested in two ways. The first is whether a person is prepared to examine his faith. That faith for which no examination is allowed is superstition. This is the first test of determining whether a faith is ethical; the second test is whether the faith is accompanied by non-violence. One's faith should not hamper practicing of others' faiths. One can examine one's faith thus: do you examine any faith other than yours on the basis of truth; are you tolerant and nonviolent regarding others' faiths; does your faith drive you to action; whether your faith enhances your human qualities or degrades them. Insisting on such examination of faith is essential for improving human life and culture.

Secular viewpoint and criticism of religion can be developed only by Rationalism which is a moral philosophy of human wellbeing in all respects. Rationalism propagates secular ethics that has human happiness and dignity at its core. Individual freedom and individual responsibility from which emanates individual freedom is the foundation of this ethic. Rationalist philosophy is distinct from religion and unlike religion, is concerned with the perceptible world only but it does not oppose religion. Secular Ethics is founded on the cause-effect relation revealed in the adage, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. Rationalism proposes to examine all systems and thoughts that hinder worldly wellbeing of society. The rational decision taken by the individual on his own is more

praiseworthy than the decision taken because of the fear of god or lure of emancipation.

Society plays a big role in building moral values. Organized religions like Christianity and Islam have emanated from the then prevailing chaotic atmosphere of oppression, exploitation and immorality in the regions of their birth; new religion that emerged out of such chaos gave the society an alternative moral and orderly societal arrangement. People were expected to remain moral due to faith in the religion, fear or love of god and lure of emancipation. But in practice religion became oppressive and exploitative. Society changes with time; whereas religion being static, society outgrows traditional religious values making them obsolete. But the custodians of religion warn people that, 'society cannot be sustained without morality and morality without religion. And rational examination of religion uproots morality altogether.' As opposed to this, rationalism advocates a morality of 'greatest good of the largest numbers and fulfilment of natural human urge'. Every individual has the right to take his own decisions but the same right compels him to respect similar right enjoyed by others. A human being has to live and grow in society and finally quit it when his time comes. He knows that he has to accept human values of love, friendship, affection and co-operation that are also for his own good and the good of society. These moral values have evolved from biological instincts during the course of evolution. Moral individuals make a moral society and a moral society alone can nourish individual morality. This cause-effect relation is very easy to understand and does not need the support of any spiritual principle. However without a favourable atmosphere it is difficult to build and sustain a moral society, e.g. when individuals of 50 families living in a slum, have to fetch water from a single tap, bitter quarrels are inevitable. What is required in such circumstances is not sermons on morality but making enough water and taps available.

Norms are values that help decide whether a given social behaviour is right or wrong. Habituation to these normative values leads to slavery; so much so that, no one dares change them even when they put the whole of society in danger. Those in power have a vested interest in upholding normative values. Changing normative values, therefore, leads to far-reaching social reconstruction. Although such broad social reconstruction cannot easily happen, an individual can sharpen his common sense and morals and develop new values. To initiate the process of change, even pointing out defects in the norms and canvassing opposition to them is important. 'No talk without action' should not be a precondition for attempting to bring about any change. ANIS activists are engaged in all such activities to quietly further their cause.

Engraining democratic Human values - Changing Norms:

Comprehensive Social Change is not a revolutionary process; it is on the other hand a very slow evolutionary process. All of us feel the need for change in social structure and norms. And many of us also feel helpless and incapable of doing anything in bringing about a change. The danger in this thought is that it discourages individuals and institutions that strive to cause changes with whatever

resources and abilities they possess. Moreover some pessimists even go a step further and argue 'if society is not going to change, in spite of all the efforts I put in, then why shouldn't I help myself a little bit from the chaos?' ANIS activists refrain from this kind of "self-help".

Rationalists believe that thoughts become a powerful force for change when they catch the imagination of a large number of people simultaneously. What happens when such a thought is constructive and has the force of conviction of all people, united as one, is seen in the villages that have received the "Gram Swachhata Award" (Award for the cleanest village). But when such a thought happens to be destructive- e.g. convincing people that bringing down a Masjid and building a temple there, or vice versa, is a problem of utmost priority over all other development problems - it causes communal riots. This means that building a positive social psyche is very important. Even if you are unable to change the polity and economics of the country, you can still lend your hand to building up a positive social psyche.

Every individual possesses reason - the ability to discern what is good and what is bad; and therefore, can not only avoid succumbing slavishly to normative values but also fight against exploitation, political deception and high handedness, economic swindling and mental slavery, all caused by outdated normative values. A class of such rationalist intellectuals, who may not be in power, can yet create awareness among people. Our constitution has mentioned the responsibilities of individuals. It says every individual should adopt Scientific Temper, Humanism and the Spirit of Reform. Striving to change the outdated and oppressive normative values is fulfilling this responsibility.

Taking one example, the norm regarding women in the past and even at present is that 'a woman is inferior to man'. When you try to inculcate the new norm of equality of gender, it becomes necessary to articulate it and then try to practice it in your own life. Moreover one has to endeavour to apply the new value to all aspects of women's lives; to political aspect by improving women's representation in Institutions of Local Self Government, legislative assemblies, and parliament; to economic aspect by giving women equal rights in their fathers' or husbands' properties; to educational aspect by providing not only educational opportunities but also hostels and dormitories for women; and to religious aspect by refusing to perform rituals like Kanyadan.

While trying to bring about this change, one must remember that present day man with all his intellectual abilities has evolved from animal ancestors. A large part of his brain is nearly the same as that of his predecessors. His neocortex-the seat of his intelligence and judgement developed just a few thousand years ago. This period is not enough to create a coherent harmony between these two, old and the new parts of the human brain. Man is not just an entirely intellectual creature; he is emotional too and most of his decisions stem from his emotional brain derived from animal ancestry. Indeed, as Bertrand Russell said, "Our life should be inspired by love and guided by knowledge."

Faith versus Science

Rakesh Shukla

‘Spirits and demons are only projections of man’s own emotional impulses.

“Totem and Taboo” Sigmund Freud (1913)

Failure in Love, Evil-Eye of the Enemy, Lack of Progeny, Loss in Business, Alcoholism of Husband, Dispute of Property, Daughters’ marriage, Neighbours’ Envy ...All Problems Solved! Contact the Famous Tantrik Mia Abu Hasan aka Bangali Baba! In Town Just for Ten Days.

Pamphlets, wall writings and megaphone announcements like this are fairly common, not only in small mofussil towns and villages across the Subcontinent, but in the big cities too. In India, the Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act of 1954, undoubtedly enacted as a result of the pernicious Western influence, today lies unremarked in a corner. From all accounts, babas, tantriks and pirs are flourishing, as people flock to seek solutions to their ailments, real or imagined. It is not just the ignorant who flock, either; physicists, doctors and professors can be found performing pujas during eclipses, pleading for Shani (Saturn) to release the moon.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s vision of modern India, with its famous reference to dams as modern temples, is reflected in the fundamental duty of every citizen to develop a scientific temper and spirit of enquiry under the Constitution. Dozens of engineering colleges, science institutes, IITs, medical colleges and research bodies are today scattered through the length and breadth of the country, along with temples, mosques, dargahs and gurudwaras. Mythology and history coalesce in secular India – at times, archaeological evidence looks like a bit player in comparison to the power of legend.

One of the best-known recent incidents of the collision between mythology and history took place in 2007. At that time, the Indian government was planning to break a hole in the Ram Setu (Adam’s Bridge), the chain of limestone shoals off the southeastern coast of India and northwestern coast of Sri Lanka, in order to facilitate the passage of ships. There was a public outcry against the ‘destruction’ of Ram Setu – believed to be built by followers of Lord Ram for his armies to cross the sea to fight Ravan in Lanka. Some used satellite photographs from the US space agency NASA to ‘show’ an old, man-made bridge between Rameswaram and Sri Lanka, and a public-interest petition against dredging the shoals was filed before the Supreme Court of India. The court not only entertained the petition but granted a stay, directing the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to examine the matter. The ASI filed an affidavit stating that there was no historical or scientific evidence of the existence of Lord Ram or Ram Setu as a man-made bridge, but this led to an uproar led by the main opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The government hurriedly withdrew the affidavit and, in a further effort at damage control, suspended two ASI officials.

The controversy over the exact birth-place of Lord Rama (Ramjanmabhoomi), the *rathayatra* led by L K Advani as the leader of the opposition, the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent communal riots and killings – each of these events is well known. What is not so prominent in public memory is that the central government had, in 1993, referred the issue of the existence of Ram Mandir at the site of the Babri Masjid to the Supreme Court as a question of public importance. The following year, the court, to its credit, declined to go into the matter, returning the Presidential Reference unanswered.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid resulted in an upsurge of Hindu religious sentiment and catapulted the BJP into power at the Centre. Jagmohan Malhotra, the tourism and culture minister in the BJP-led government, launched a massive initiative involving the ASI in excavations and satellite tracking of extinct water channels to prove the existence of the Saraswati River. While the Saraswati might well have existed at one point as a waterway, it is as myth that the river is important. According to Hindu belief, the Saraswati, originating in the Himalaya, is the *gupt*, the secret invisible third river that meets Ganga and Yamuna at the *triveni sangam* (confluence) at Prayag, in present-day Varanasi. Thus, Malhotra's project was an attempt to establish that the river, deified as the goddess of wisdom and learning, was the magical nerve centre of India's original glorious civilisation. After the change of government, funding was stopped and the project abandoned entirely by the Congress cabinet.

Cozy coexistence

The assimilative power of Hinduism ensures no sharpening contradictions between the age of rationality and science and the world of spirits, myths, superstitions and religion. Satellite photography goes hand-in-hand with Ram Setu, Ramjanmabhoomi and the Saraswati. In fact, the age of science has made everything in India 'scientific'. Astrology, looking at the influence of planetary movement on human lives, has always claimed to be a science, and efforts were made to obliterate the distinction between astronomy and astrology during the BJP era. Each and every form of therapy, irrespective of the religion on which it is ostensibly based – from the invisible healing rays of *reiki* travelling through space, to the *sidha* system of medicine, which offers channels of energy – offers a 'science'. *Vastu*, a system of architecture and design based on directional alignments, is now likewise a vast 'science' spanning interior decoration, sculpture, art and aesthetics. It has spawned numerous experts, consultants and professors contributing to our well-being and happiness.

At the level of the individual, newspapers abound with stories of people duped by offers from sadhus to turn brass into gold, along with the modern version of converting wads of black paper into dollars by treating them with a costly chemical to be paid for by the victim. Similarly, stories are widespread of young women being taken to 'holy' men to be cured for some ailment and, instead, being sexually harassed; these clearly underline the deception and exploitation inherent in the arena.

However, it is the phenomenon of cures by visiting pirs, dargahs and temples that offers a particularly interesting interface of faith and science. Some time ago this writer, as part of a group of students of psychotherapy, visited the Balaji temple, near the town of Alwar in Rajasthan. The main deity here is Balaji, known commonly as Hanuman, and he attracts a large numbers of pilgrims for the healing of psychosomatic and mental ailments, such as dramatic alterations of personality and behaviour – those diagnosed in popular parlance as possession by *bhut-pret*, malignant evil spirits. Hanuman is associated with bravery, and there is local legend as to his divine healing powers. The temple is famous for the exorcising of the evil spirits, and involves inflicting punishment to drive away the bhut. The Indian psychoanalyst and writer Sudhir Kakar gives a brilliant exposition of the processes at play at Balaji in his book *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*.

On reaching the temple, we found a large board, prominently listing directives from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). For instance, the commission has outlawed any form of chaining a patient or placing heavy objects upon them, traditionally used all over India to drive away evil spirits. As we entered the temple, our clothes, body language and behaviour quickly proclaimed our metropolitan identity; as we stood together, an island alienated from the people who milled around, we were the very picture of NHRC inspectors, come to check for malpractices. Feeble attempts by a few of us to talk with those who had come for healing resulted in very little conversation.

So, I decided to change into a traditional North Indian dhoti with a saffron top; together with my beard and long hair, I began to fit in immediately. So decked out, I went with the others towards the house of the Mahant's elder brother, a few kilometres away, to discover that the curative action had all moved out of the temple due to the intervention of the modern secular state in the shape of the NHRC guidelines. Groups of people singing bhajans were all along the road. One set of patients predominantly comprised swaying young and middle-aged women, all in a trance. Around them were mostly men and a couple of older women, singing bhajans accompanied by the *manjira* and *dholak*.

After a short distance, the group stopped by near a peepul tree, believed to be the abode of bhuts and pretas as well as of the female counterparts, the *chudails* and *dayans*. At one point, two of the women lay down on the ground, while the onlookers piled incredibly large, heavy stones on their frail bodies – all to drive out the bhut. Some were crying, others laughing, still others angry and hurling abuses. The women were being constantly egged on by the onlookers to 'let go' and enter a trance. On watching this scene, I found a part of myself outraged: rather than empowering, the 'exorcism' seemed to offer a safety valve by which to vent pent-up fury, to hurl abuses at husbands and mother-in-laws, and then to return again to the same restrictive life. Another part of me realised that intervention would serve no constructive purpose but to invoke the ill-will, if not wrath, of the community.

At this point, I was deliberately standing apart from the rest of my group, which was looking as alienated as ever. I started talking with a young man from a village in Mainpuri district of Uttar Pradesh.

Having grown up in Agra, I was familiar with the area, and he informed me that the visit was an annual occurrence. Each year, family members and the patients from neighbouring villages and some regulars get together to hire a truck and come to Balaji. There are a number of *dharamshalas* and cheap eating places around the temple for the pilgrims. This particular group had a young hysterical man swaying, as well. Suddenly, he fell at my feet and began begging me for forgiveness. The modern progressive secular within me rebelled at such a sight, but my upbringing in a Hindu household had sufficiently cued me; so, I lifted the young man, embraced and 'blessed' him.

My group again started walking. I felt increasingly at ease and contemplated joining in the singing of bhajans, as the group stopped near a tap. It was searingly hot and, welcoming the break, I bent to wash my face and take a drink. The hysterical young man was next to me and, as I straightened, he directed a young woman in a trance to lie at my feet, who promptly lay down with her forehead on my feet. Again, I pulled my foot away instinctively, feeling extremely uncomfortable and unnerved at the prospect of more women falling at my feet. I slowly extricated myself, aware that too abrupt a departure could well precipitate some reaction.

Who did I represent for the young man? Who was he seeing while looking at me? Perhaps his father or grandfather, whose forgiveness he might have been seeking. What was the young man projecting on to me – omniscience and omnipotence? He was, after all, lying at my feet and looking up to what to him would have appeared a towering figure with long white hair and beard. Perhaps it may have appeared to him and the woman to be Mahakal Bhairav, the deity at Balaji, who doles out the punishment to the bhut.

Taking dictation

The incident at Balaji gives a glimpse at an experiential level of the psychological processes which may offer an explanation within a rational framework for the cure and improved emotional health of those seeking the help of pirs, babas and gurus. Far more people suffering from mental illnesses are helped by the traditional healing methods in India than by the tiny number of clinical psychologists in the country. Clearly there is a kind of regression of an adult to an earlier state. This could make for a receptivity and child-like faith which contributes to the therapeutic success of the suggested course of action – tying an amulet to ward off evil, putting rice grains in a certain pattern or forming certain sacred words or verses in a vessel and drinking water from it or a myriad other methods. Along with feelings of being 'little me' would be projection of great power, strength and wisdom on to the pir, baba or guru.

This would imbue the actions like putting the hand on the head of the supplicant with great mystical power contributing to feeling better. At times blessings may expiate feelings of guilt for perceived transgressions committed by the individual. Akin to the process in a psychoanalytic setting, along with projection may be a degree of identification with the Baba contributing to improved emotional health of the suffering soul. Interestingly, the origins of psychoanalysis lie in hysteria, which constitutes the bulk of

the patients who come to Balaji. Individual hysteria apart, India sees periodic outbreaks of mass hysteria, too. In 1995, a devotee offering milk to an idol of Ganesh in a temple in south Delhi reported that the deity had drunk the milk. Word spread like lightning and, suddenly, deities all over North India were reported to be drinking milk. Inevitably, millions thronged to temples, resulting in mile-long queues and massive traffic jams. The news even crossed international borders, with deities in temples in Nepal, Britain and Canada following suit. Scientists talking of capillary action and surface tension were unable to sway most of the pilgrims, with many people testifying to having personally observed the occurrence. In a similar instance in 2001, mass panic spread in Delhi about a 'monkey man' attacking people while wearing a helmet with glowing red eyes; reportedly, he was seen by dozens of people. The police even circulated a description of the monkey man in efforts to catch him. The sighting of the monkey man at diverse locations simultaneously seemed to establish the imaginary nature of the creature.

Quite apart from such occasional phenomena, Sathya Sai Baba, who passed away in April, had a huge following, which devoutly believed that the Baba produced not only *vibhuti* (ash) but also watches and other objects out of thin air. Sigmund Freud looked upon the belief in such 'omnipotence of thought' as akin to the immense belief of primitive man in the power of his wishes: 'The basic reason why what he sets about by magical means comes to pass is, after all, simply that he wills it.'

The co-existence of science and irrational beliefs is probably true in all societies. According to surveys done in the heartland of scientific research, a sizeable section of people in America subscribe to creationism and intelligent design. In fact, teaching of evolution-versus-creationism in schools has been to be an ongoing debate. Similarly, regression, projection and identification are processes at play in the human psyche. However, it is the pantheon of gods, the pirs, babas, dargahs and the SUVs, i-pods, Macs which constitute the special flavour of the Subcontinent. In the middle of gleaming cosmopolitan New Delhi is a dargah with hundreds of clay pots tied to trees – Matka Pir. Each day hundreds of people come and tie a matka to the tree for the fulfilment of their wishes.

Like Pandora's Box, the cocktail of magic, spirit, rationality and logic throws up strange entities in India. In a recent interview, Justice P N Bhagwati – a former chief justice of India, a pioneer of judicial activism and public-interest litigation, and a staunch devotee of the late Sathya Sai Baba – stated, 'As a professional, each time I would sit down to write a judgement at 5 o'clock in the morning, I was only writing what my god dictated. Bhagwan held my hand as I put pen to paper.'

Courtesy: *Himal Aug 11*



Gods on Earth: Shankaracharya says no to worship of Sai Baba

Ram Puniyani

The phenomenon of God is probably the most complex one in the World. For believers there is a range of belief system about the supernatural powers. For agnostics it is 'I don't know' and for atheists there is no supernatural power. The systems of thought relevant to the topic range from Animists (nature worshippers), polytheists (multiple gods/goddesses), tri-theists (Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh or Father, Son and the Holy spirit), Monotheists (single Universal God) to Atheists. In the concept of God we have 'god as a physical being' to formless the God. Adivasis are animists, worshipping the nature and spirits of their ancestors. In different religions the concept is very different, including the fact that some religions do not have the concept of God like Buddhism and Jainism. Polytheism prevailed in Greek society, with different Gods and Goddesses endowed with special virtues. Ancient Aryans also had polytheism, with multitude of Gods and Goddesses looking after different virtues and aspects of the life on Earth. We have a Goddess each for wealth (Laxmi) knowledge (Sarswati) and Power (Durga) We also have a God each for lightening (Indra) air (Marut) sex (Kamdevta) liquor (Som devta) amongst the plethora of the divine powers. Hindu mythology is a rainbow exposition of the diversity and complexity of the lives of Gods and Goddesses.

There is no fixed timeline of the phenomenon of God. Diverse concepts begin in different time periods. From animism, the most ancient concept to polytheism-monotheism and atheism come up over a period of time but not in a sequential fashion. Simultaneously, there come up the traditions of Charvak, Buddhism and Jainism which either do not talk about God or deny the existence of God. While today the prophet based religions like Christianity and Islam have a definitive concept, the Hindu religion has plethora of divine powers, Hinduism also has assimilated the diverse concepts, which merrily co-exist. That's how in my childhood while reciting Hanuman Chalisa and reading Ramayan, (Lord Ram) I could reverentially go through the text of Mahabharata, with many Gods playing their different interesting roles. My family-community, worshipped Banyan tree on one hand and on the other had parallel worship of bullocks, of snakes and what have you. I vividly remember taking the wooden bullocks to neighbors and getting some sweets or small change as a reward. Every Saturday, mendicants with a vessel filled with oil used to come and my grandfather used to slip some coins in to the vessel, while at the same time performing the puja of Lord Ram.

Last three decades in particular while on one hand one saw the plethora of Godmen like Mahesh Yogi, Rajneesh, J.Krishnamurthy, Asaram Bapu, Satya Sai baba (Bhagwan) coming to the fore, the popularity of Sai Baba of Shirdi and Mata Vaishno Devi has gone up exponentially. Bhagwan Satya Sai, who died few years ago, had vast following and he was regarded as the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai

baba. At the same time Shirdi Sai pilgrimage became very popular and his temples came up in most cities. Sai Baba of Shirdi has a beautiful syncretic background. While he was born in a Muslim family he came up more in Sufi tradition and intermingled with equal affection amongst Hindus as well as Muslims. His major focus was bringing Hindus and Muslims together. One major landmark in his life will give the essence of his efforts. In 1896 he instituted the annual Sufi 'urs' festival with the explicit purpose of bringing these two communities together. In 1912 he combined this Urs with Hindu Ram navami festival. This effort of his strengthened his Sufi initiative of co-operation, symbiosis and tolerance. During the festival Hindus would worship in the mosque along with Muslims, each community following their own rituals. The Baba would put the sandalwood paste on the forehead of Mlahspati, the priest of local Khandoba temple, who in turn would reciprocate the gesture. Baba was deeply steeped in humanism, the core of all religions, and so initially Muslims as well as Hindus started respecting him.

By and by more and more of Hindus started worshipping him and today he is more of a Hindu deity than a Muslim one. In Hinduism as such there is a scope for new Gods and Goddesses also (e.g. Santoshi Ma, Satyanarayan). Apart from Sai Baba; Swami Parmhans is another one who has been raised to the level of divinity, and his more famous disciple Swami Vivekananda, also started a mission in his name.

The controversy around worshipping of Sai Baba was raised by Shankaracharya Swami Swaroopanand (June 2014) who described Shirdi Sai baba as a Muslim ascetic, and proclaimed that he cannot be worshipped like a Hindu deity. He also said that his campaign is to protect the Hindu religion and that he will continue irrespective. Sadhvi Uma bharti currently Union Minister of Water Resources, who was one of the prominent figures in Ram Temple agitation, leading to demolition of Babri masjid and deepening the communal divides, is also worshipper of Sai baba. In a letter to Swami Swaroopanand she explained the rationale behind her statement where she had said that looking upon someone as a god was people's personal choice.

While Sai Baba has been accepted as God by large sections of Hindus, it is probably for the first time that someone, Shankaracharya, has objected to this popular trend. As such Hinduism is a collation of multiple traditions. The clerical Brahminical tradition to which Shankracharya belongs is rigid and orthodox, while the other traditions of Nath, Tantra, Siddhanta and Bhakti are more flexible and adapt to the situation very easily. The Hindu practices have evolved continuously. On one hand the clerical ones emphasize on the status quo, the non Brahminical traditions have flexibility and fluidity. It will require a deeper study to understand as to why the worship of Jai Mata Di, Sai Baba, Santoshi Maa has become more popular during last few decades, surely it is part of broader inclusive Hindu practice as well. One needs to realize that the religious practices of different religions are not uniform. Even in the Universal, Prophet based religions; there are sects, Catholic-Protestants, Shia-Sunni, Hinayan-Mahayan, Digambar-Shetambar, to name the few. The orthodox versions of religions have been used as the base

of politics within every religion. South Asia is today in the grip of rising religiosity on the one hand and growing assertion of politics in the name of religion on the other. The more conservative orthodox versions are picked up for political abuse, Wahabi version from Islam, Brahminical version from Hinduism, and similar conservative version from Buddhism in Myanmar-Sri Lanka-Thailand in particular.

People should be left to their own wisdom and choice in matters of the faith. Imposing, asserting a particular version from the interpretation of the texts does complicate the matters and creates strife, the way the controversy raised by Shankaracharya is doing.

While on the topic of God, recently a book has come out, “Why Atheism will replace religion: The triumph of earthly pleasures over pie in the sky” written by Nigel Barber. This book predicts that religions, believers, will become a minority Vis a Vis the practice of secularism in the decade of 2040s. This book relates the rise/fall of the religion with economic power and makes an observation that atheists are much more in number in developed countries. This book is based on the study of 137 nations conducted by the author who concludes that in the countries; more developed the welfare system; higher is the number of atheists. The book’s crunch line is, in countries where distribution of income is even, lesser is the number of religious people. The author is a prominent psychologist. He makes a prediction that people will feel lesser need of supernatural beliefs when the tangible world is providing them for their real needs. Also in a survey conducted in America 20% people identified themselves as Atheists.

While we wait for the realisability of such prediction, we should respect the people’s choices about their faith, this is a message loud and clear given by the followers of Sai baba in response to what Shankaracharya said.



Ethics, Morals and Laws in Business

Ashok R Garde

It was a delight to see a new book on ‘ethics as the foundation of business’. As one of IIM-A Business Books, this book on “Being Ethical” covers vital aspects of running any small or large business. A chapter each is devoted to basics of ethics, ethical analysis, and ethical issues related to customers, employees, competitors, environment, and society. Guidelines are given for building an ethical organisation and for becoming an ethical manager. The last chapter is on ethics in management education. Neat organisation of the contents as well as easy readability make this book attractive.

However, discerning readers who expect definitive guidelines on ethical issues will be disappointed. The book keeps conveying that ethical issues are complex, do not permit unambiguous logical decisions, and what is ethical depends on context and on own value system .

The reasons for dissatisfaction are four:

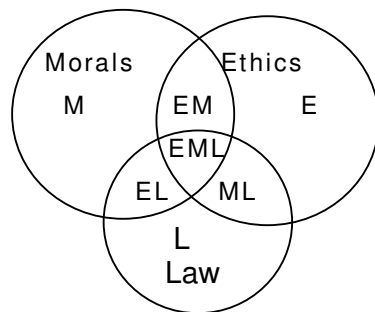
- Lack of clarity on what is ethical, or moral, or even legal
- Incorrect identification of ethical 'dilemmas'
- Confusion about standards and norms
- Omission of two vital ethical issues

Ethics, Morals and Laws

The author has rightly conveyed that ethics may demand more than law, and that a law may be unethical . A similar juxtaposition of ethics and morals has not been done. In fact, the term ethics is sometimes used in the sense of morals, and some immoral actions are shown to be punishable without mentioning that such actions have also to be illegal to permit punishing. These ambiguities have occurred because the three terms are not clearly defined.

When an action X taken by a person A for his/her happiness affects another person B, and when the same action is taken by B, person A continues to be happy, then the action X is ethical. Morals are the Dos and Don'ts inculcated into a person right from the childhood by parents, schools, religion and society. Laws are moral and/or ethical and/or other tenets made enforceable (mostly) by the state—i.e. punishable when caught flouting. Thus, ethical tenets are universally applicable; morals are culture specific; and laws are state (government at all levels) specific.

Their interrelationship is a Venn diagram of three intersecting circles. They form seven classes: M, E, L, EM, EL and EML.



Any action of any individual falls in one of these seven classes and is either acceptable, not acceptable – deserves rejection – or is neutral. An action can be ethically right, morally wrong and legally neutral: example - 'A Jain eats onions '. A moral tenet of Jainism forbids such eating, but since this behaviour of an individual does not affect any other person, it is ethically neutral. Fortunately, no

law exists (in India) making eating onions a punishable moral tenet. Consider 'stealing': this action is morally, ethically and legally wrong.

Using this method of classification, every single ethical question can be resolved unambiguously. *The commonly cited 5 'doctrines' or theories' on ethics) or the 'dharma' concepts do not resolve issues categorically; and hence all these need to be set aside.* Managers need to test every moral tenet using the ethics test, know the relevant law, and classify the needed action in one of the seven classes. Then decide whether it is ethically/morally/legally acceptable, not acceptable or neutral. Ethically unacceptable decisions are often considered permissible owing to lack of clarity on WHAT is ethical by definition: all cases (about 15) presented in the boxes in this book as dilemmas: they are Right versus Wrong situations, where the wrong should not be done. A fertiliser unit polluting the sea water is undoubtedly an unethical action: it is Right versus Wrong. No cost computations or benefits assessment can make 'polluting' acceptable ethically. Ethics does not permit 'tradeoffs'. The plant management needs to admit, "We happen to be unethical because adhering to ethics is too costly" Classification does not change because of the context.

All examples from Mahabharata are about the morals at that time. Bhishma hitting on the thigh of Duhshasana was *morally* wrong (then): the de-robing of Draupadi in a gathering of people was *ethically* and *morally* wrong, but was *legally* correct (then, there). Bheema did nothing unethical in hitting Duhshasana below the belt! Ethical issues in wars are essentially questions of 'Wrong versus Wrong'. When terrorists strike, does one think of responding ethically? Such situations occur rarely, if at all, in business transactions and are best avoided in books on business ethics.

Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas are only those where each available alternative action is ethical. This becomes a question of 'Right versus Right'.

The definition of ethical acts given above shows that all cases (about 15) presented in the boxes are not dilemmas at all! They are Right versus Wrong situations, where the wrong should not be done. Only when the case is of Right versus Right, like downsizing a business to make it survive, it can be considered as a dilemma. Some 'constructed cases' used to bring out dilemmas - persons traveling on railway tracks and in an overcrowded ship start from an unethical and/or illegal premise. Having been wrong to be begin with, every solution naturally looks wrong and one needs to minimize the wrong! .

Ethics, morals and laws refer to the Dos and Don'ts that human beings should follow to live happily with each other in human society. The moment the field is widened to include the life of animals (other living beings), we face an impossible situation. No human can then survive since killing (eating) living things, animals (and plants), would then be unethical! Even global warming needs to be controlled and biodiversity needs to be preserved for the long term survival of human species, not for the sake of ethical considerations to animal and plant kingdoms.

Standards and Norms

Norms refer to what a large number from a 'population' are or do, while standards are values established through scientific experimentation or through rigorous logic. Neither are enforceable unless made into a law. Consider the case of air pollution from exhausts of cars. The standard value for permissible level of carbon monoxide is determined scientifically as that which does no harm to humans. The norm –what most cars exhaust –is very much higher. The laws like Euro I and Euro II bring the enforceable level to the standard level in convenient steps.

Some moral tenets can be 'norms' of a specific culture. But no ethical or moral or legal tenet needs to be a norm to be considered as a rule to be followed. Therefore, to use expressions like "ethical judgments are normative" "moral standards --all ethical standards are relative -- enforceable morals is not meaningful.

Vital Omissions: Tax Evasion and Corruption

Tax evasion and corresponding black money creation is not even mentioned. Should the traders, professionals, business owners and managers not be told to behave ethically (and morally and legally) and pay all due taxes? This is a Right versus Wrong situation: absolutely no dilemma here. Corruption is stated to be difficult to define (p.88), but it has been defined precisely by Transparency International as 'using entrusted responsibility for undue personal gain'. Only 'gifts' are discussed. Neither the employee nor the employer is told not to be corrupt. Every book on 'Being Ethical' needs to show 'why/how not to succumb to corrupt practices' and "how/why not to indulge in corrupt practices" To desist temptations requires integrity and character; the vital requirement of excellent self-control is not mentioned explicitly. The two unethical practices that damage India most –tax evasion and corruption - are conspicuous by their absence: *why?*

'Takeaways' like -- managers have to choose between different actions, each of which has right and wrong aspects." "–there are no absolutely ethical or unethical decisions –"these are dependent on personal values ---cannot be uniform all over the organisation." dilute the very message of the book.

'What is ethical' can be answered unequivocally. Creative solutions are needed in all cases: in Right versus Wrong to get the desired results without doing the wrong; in Right versus Right, for maximizing the benefit in a humane manner.

If the revised edition of the book adopts the system of defining ethics as universal and morals as culture specific, this excellent book can give unambiguous guidelines on 'Being Ethical' to managers the world over.

BE ETHICAL: Ethics as the foundation of business

S. Manikutty

Random House India, 2011



Astrologers, No, Swindlers!

Hari Mohan Jha

That day the astrologer was studying the almanac. Then Uncle (खट्टर काका!) suddenly came there. When the astrologer saw him, he was in trepidation and began to pack up the almanac and his other belongings. Uncle accosted him, "What are you studying, my dear astrologer?"

"The newly-wed bride is still at her mother's place. Looking for the auspicious day for her to come here," the astrologer said.

"She can come here whenever she wishes. Why do you take so much trouble to fix it?"

"She has to commence her journey on an auspicious day, shouldn't she?"

"True. She should not commence her journey on a bad day such as when there is a cyclone. Isn't that all that's there to it?"

"There isn't a single good day this month," the astrologer said.

"Why not? This month has all the thirty days."

"But the time is moving in the easterly direction, isn't it?"

"Don't tell me those devious things. Is time a bull left to roam freely in the village to say that it has gone to graze in the open field in the east? Time always stays where it ought to be."

"You don't believe in science. Now the sun travels from the west to the east."

"So what? What's the bride's mistake in that that you don't permit her to come to her in-law's home?"

"What do you want me to do? There's no auspicious time for the next three months."

"Why?"

"Look. She can't come here in the month of Pushya."

"Why?"

"This month is not auspicious."

"What sin has Pushya month committed?"

"How can anyone argue with you? In Magha and Falguna months time reverses its path. In Chaitra, moon will not be beneficial."

"God himself is against these people. That's why they are asking you to fix a good day. O! Master, what do you mean when you say time is reversing in Falguna and the moon is not favourably disposed of in Chaitra?"

"Then, Bhadra month (astrologically not auspicious) will arrive," said the astrologer.

"You are the most inauspicious Bhadra, I say. Ask me instead. I'll fix today as the auspicious day," Uncle said.

"How's that possible? Today is Monday. And it is prescribed that you have to give up travelling in the easterly direction on Monday," the astrologer said.

"Why? Are there any nails in the path or what?" Uncle said.

"You speak like an atheist. 'Travel to the east is proscribed on Saturday and Monday.'"

"Why? Tell me then how would the train from Delhi to Howrah run today? In fact, the whole earth itself rotates from the west to the east. How?"

"Wise people travel when the celestial constellation is beneficial to them," the astrologer said.

"If travelling in the direction of strength causes rain of *laddus*, then I'll travel everyday in that direction. I travel everyday in every direction. Where there is a proscription, nails didn't hurt me. Nor did it rain flowers when there was no problem with the day."

"Do you mean to say the directional problem is all humbug?"

"The problem that you are talking about is nothing but the thorn in your eye."

"What about the problem with the particular days? Is that also humbug?"

"Yes. Why is that there no such problem in other countries? We are the worst fools, aren't we?"

"If you ignore science, what can be said? But take a look at 'Muhurta Chintamani'..."

Uncle snapped at him. "Not Muhurta Chintamani' but 'Dhurta Chintamani'. Self serving people like you have trapped everyone in the great vicious circle of auspicious moments. Muhurtam for every damn thing. Time for the king to perform abhishekam, for the army, horses and the elephants to march, soldier to wear the armoury, merchant for purchase and sale, money-lender to grant loans, washerman to wash cloths, dancer to start the dance. What is this but sheer humbug? The farmers have been caught in the web of muhurtam for everything - for ploughing, seeding, transplantation and harvest. You have a greater grip on the women's hair. When should they tie the hair into a bun? When should the fire be lit? When should they bathe? When should the children be breast-fed?"

Uncle observed the expression of surprise on my face and said, "I'm not saying this for fun. The astrologers have attained great control over the women's breasts also. Even the child who suckles is not spared by the astrologers. If you don't trust me, listen to this –

'...' (Daivajna Vallabha)

'It is good to breast-feed the child on all days except Chaturthi and Tuesday.'

"Arey! What's this madness? Why should Mangala planet be annoyed and cause harm if a woman gives her breast to her new born child on Tuesday? Why should it have enmity with her breast?"

"Uncle, probably the planets and the stars do have an effect and that's the reason for such discussion on time."

"Arey! Time is the cause of our ruin. Time at home and outside. Time for the field. Birth time. Time for death. Time for marriage. Surely no emperor or king would have had more fuss and pomp than the emperor of time. 'He will destroy if annoyed.' This fear has made cowards of people. Muhurth for

marriage, muhurth for nuptials and muhurth for house warming. This is not all. There's muhurth for conception too. What is this if not extreme foolishness?"

"Uncle! I'm sure you are saying this for fun. How could anyone consult the almanac for conceiving?"

"Arey! You don't seem to believe this! You are innocent. What do you know? Listen to this relating to the time for conceiving –

'...'

'There's no permit for conception on *shasti*, *ashtamai*, full moon day, no moon day, *chavithi* and *chaturdasi*. There's permit for this activity only on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.' Answer this: Will the moon be eclipsed or will the sky break up if the bride and bride groom have intercourse on the pleasant full moon night? If the couple have sex on Sunday, will the horses of the Sun's chariot be frightened or the wheel be broken? Why should the astrologers, like the self existent beings, like the flies in the ointment, poke those noses in everything as if it is their personal matter? Why do they interfere like the scorpions in the affair of the couple? Why should they come like this, uninvited?"

"Uncle, don't you have faith in astrology?"

"Arey! If astrology was true, I should have died two thousand times by now."

"How, Uncle?"

"This is what is said in astrology-

'Trouble is round the corner if oil is applied on Sunday. Monday it'll enure brightness; Tuesday, death; Wednesday, money; Thursday, penury and Saturday, comfort. In these, only the astrologer should tell what the relationship between the cause and the effect is. For the last fifty years I have been applying oil everyday. In these years, there must have been more than two thousand five hundred Tuesdays. Yet I'm alive. Now tell me. Do you want me to believe in astrology?"

"Uncle! Only an astrologer can give a reply to this."

"What would he say? He'll fix you tightly in his net. Look at the hubbub created in Ruthuprakaran, where at one place, it is said –

'...'

'If a woman menstruates on Sunday, she will become a widow.'

"At another place, it is said –

'...'

'If if a woman menstruates on Panchami, she would never be a widow.'

"Now I'll ask the astrologer this. What will happen to the woman who menstruates on panchami Sunday?"

The astrologer remained mum. Then Uncle continued. "At one place it is said –

'...'

'If a woman attains puberty in Magha month, she would give birth to children.'

“At another place, it’s like this-

‘ ... ’

‘If a woman attains puberty in Krithika star, she would be childless.’

“Now ask the astrologer if she would give birth to an impotent person if she attains puberty in Magha month and Krithika star?”

Noticing that the astrologer was in no position to reply, Uncle said, “See this finny thing. It’s said at one place-

‘ ... ’

‘If puberty is attained in Dhanu rasi, she will be woman of virtue.’

“At another place –

‘ ... ’

‘If puberty is attained on Saturday, she will be a prostitute.’

“Now you decide this yourself. What would happen if puberty is attained on Saturday in Dhanu rasi?”

“Arey! What all should I have to recount? So much of deceit, fraud, trickery, cunningness. If I describe everything, it’ll be a big *purana*. Yet, people here go on holding the astrologer’s tail.”

As Uncle was speaking, Buddhinath Choudhary came running and said, “O! Astrologer master! Just now a boy is born in my home. That’s why I’ve come rushing to you. Please cast his horoscope and advise me.”

“How long ago was the child born?” asked the astrologer.

“Ten minutes ago,” Badrinath replied.

The astrologer consulted the almanac and started. He shouted, “My goodness!”

Uncle asked, “What’s matter? Have you been bitten by a hornet or what?”

The astrologer put his hand on his head and said, “No. If it were that I wouldn’t have been bothered. But I see wholesale destruction.”

Buddhinath Choudhry’s face turned pale. He shivered and said, “Please tell me at once, master. What’s there in the horoscope?”

“What’s there in the horoscope to say? Mud and dust. His birth star is *moola* first *padam* and in *ganda yoga*. He’ll be the cause of his father’s death.”

Buddhinath Choudhry felt as though he was struck by thunder. His eyes brimmed with tears.

The astrologer gravely said, “This child has been born to cause trouble to you. There are only two options. Cast away the child. Or else, send the child and his mother to his grandfather’s house. You can’t see his face for eight years. And from now on you have to donate cows, gold, perform *navagraha puja*, et al.”

Uncle couldn't take it any more. "Whoever has written this is a big scoundrel, a conceited fellow and a cheat. You are the evil planets in reality. In the name of stars, you make good of your own star. Through your needless conspiracy, why do you torture the poor man?"

"Does it mean that you don't believe in horoscope?" the astrologer asked.

"As far as I know, there's one benefit out of the horoscope. Your child will get ear rings. In my view horoscope is nothing but trickery. Thousands of children would have been born at this time. Will their destiny and life be the same because of that? Twins will be born at the same time. One will survive and the other won't. The horoscope of both must be the same. Then why are the results are so contrasting?"

The astrologer was somewhat confused and said, "Bhrigu and Parasara and others have dilated so much on the horoscopes. Do you imply that that was all humbug (mithya, a mirage)?"

"For thousands of years, you have been in this cunning business, peddling these names, aren't you? Whatever occurs to you, make a sloka and attribute it to Parasara. O! Man. I have also read books on astrology. Only rogues could have written those things. Putting blinkers on the eyes of the householders, they have said obscene things about their women too."

The astrologer started, "Where? For example?"

"Not one or two. Many. Look at this –

'...'

"Looking at the horoscope of the house owner, they (astrologers) would doubtless know that the man's wife would be stout, like a sack of puffed rice. That's not all. By making calculations of the planets in the horoscope, they would find out the shape of their breasts too.

'If Kuja is ruling, her breasts would be large and robust.'"

I was surprised. Uncle noticed this and said, "Don't gape at me like this. This is nothing. Listen further –

'...'

'The wife of the person who has this yoga doubtless would become a prostitute or would satisfy the desire of many persons.'"

"Uncle! Married life would be ruined completely because of such words, wouldn't it?" I asked.

Uncle said, "The persons who make the sloka have no worry. Hear this –

'...'

'If the child's horoscope has this yoga, the child without doubt is a bastard.'"

I said, "This sloka can cut the throat of a woman."

"Not just hers. There's a sloka which would slit the throat of her brother-in-law's as well. Look at this

'...'

'If the horoscope has this yoga, the son would be born out of the semen of the brother-in-law.'

"The smell of the semen would reveal it to the astrologer! Tell me what is this if not plunder, pillage, conspiracy and goondaism? Such ruffians in this country are called the ocean of learning of astrology."

"You have mentioned so many things. Are they all in the treatises on astrology?" I asked.

"What do you mean? I've quoted from the texts. The astrologer is right in front of you. Ask him if all these are there in the texts or not? And what text is it? 'Parasara horasarah'."

The astrologer scratched his head and said, "True. These are there in the text. 'Parasara horasarah' is a standard text on astrology. But why do you call it untrue?"

"Not only untrue, but obscene. The kind of abuses written in that can't be heard anywhere except in brothel houses. Look at this –

'If a person has the influence of this planet, he would covet other women. His wife will become a prostitute. His mother will be a bitch.'

"Such abuses about wife and mother will be heard only in cultureless families. Is this a language of the scholars?"

"Uncle! I never knew that the texts on astrology would contain such words."

"You don't know because you never read astrology. You would know if you read 'Brihajatakam' and 'Parasara horasarah'."

The astrologer couldn't contain himself any more. "Where's the evidence to say that all this is false?" he asked, as if he was throwing a challenge.

Uncle replied: "I'm the evidence. My horoscope predicted that I'd be a king. Forget kingdom. I don't even have four acres of land. Instead of *rajayoga*, everyday I'm forced to practise *hatayoga*. Then about *jaraja* yoga. Apply some logic. Does anyone get into adultery after consulting the almanac? Thereafter, would the child come of the womb after checking the *lagna*? Forget about others. You can't detect even your own child's *jaraja* yoga. Keeping in view people like you, it has been said –

'...'

'You would be watching the time of union of the moon with Visakha but wouldn't know of your wife's activities, who is rollicking in the embrace of many people.'

"That being the case, how could you catch that someone is a bastard?"

The astrologer was angry. "What you have said is abusive. Do you mean to say that the wife of an astrologer would be a prostitute?"

Uncle smiled and said, "The feminine gender for *ganaka* (astrologer) is *ganika* (prostitute). Isn't that so? Besides, *ganaka* also more or less does the same work as *ganika*. Look at how well it has been explained –

'...'

“Ganaka and ganika are equal. The Creator intended both to earn money by enticing people through their five parts of the body. Ganaka opens the almanac and shows to the people. Ganika opens and shows her five parts.”

The astrologer was as good as dead. Yet, he proudly said, “Whatever has been mentioned in the science of astrology is proven and true. Bhrgu and Parasara had vision of the past, present and future.”

“Do you have faith in astrology?” asked Uncle.

“Of course,” replied the astrologer.

“Then let me look at your horoscope.”

The astrologer hesitantly picked up the horoscope and handed it over to Uncle.

Uncle examined the horoscope and said, “Do you want me to tell you the result? You’ll not run away, would you?”

“Why would I run away?” said the astrologer.

“Then hear this. Parasara says like this –

‘If Sukra enters planet Mangala or is seen in conjunction with Mangala, the person will have the pleasure of *bhaga* kiss.’

“Then look at where Sukra is in your chart. Tell me if the result applies to you or not. Do you want me to explain the meaning of this in crude language to everyone?”

The moment he heard this, the astrologer packed his books and left the place in a huff.

Uncle kept calling him from behind. “O! Master, o astrologer! Take at least some nut powder and go.”

But why would the astrologer return?

(English translation from Hindi by Mr. K. Chandrahas)



We're Superstitious!

We're making a sizable dent in the glass ceiling, managing home and work with the dexterity of accomplished jugglers and have access to breaking news in health and technology. Yet, when it comes to menstruation, women in 21st-century urban and semi-urban India, still prefer to err on the side of superstition, going by a nationwide survey conducted by Whisper and IPSOS.

The highlights of the study included revelations that during their menstrual cycle, 65% of women wait until the fourth day to wash their hair, 59% of women in metros don't touch the pickle, 54% of women believe in not watering plants, as many as 65% of women perceived their “monthly period” as coming in the way of achieving their full potential and more than half of urban India follow these and

other menstrual taboos. While we joke openly with other women (and men) about PMS, clearly our ideas about menstruation and its implications are a bit awry.

“All these are just myths,” insists anthropologist Dr Suneela Garg, a representative of Feminine and Infant Hygiene Association of India (FIHA). “Menstruation is nothing but a simple physiological process that takes place every month. Can you imagine the economic implications of losing five precious working days every month unnecessarily? We now have thinner napkins, you can prepare yourself for the pain by keeping anti-spasmodic medication on hand, and counselling is also available; there's no need to let menstruation hamper your plans.”

Adivi Gupta, Founder, Menstrupedia.com, is working to create greater awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene, not only amongst girls but boys too, through a comic book that releases next month (amongst other platforms). She tells us how despite coming from a highly educated family, she followed menstrual taboos when she was younger. So is there any rationale behind our beliefs?

Adivi points out that, “At one point in time, the river was a communal bathing space, the source of drinking water and the location for washing clothes and vessels. This may have prompted women to stay away from the river when they were menstruating to avoid contaminating the communal water body”.

Dr Susheela draws to our attention how things worked backwards for women; because they couldn't bathe, they weren't permitted to worship (as most worship requires that you bathe beforehand); thus women came to be regarded as impure whilst they were menstruating; the notion of impurity stuck and developed corollaries— women weren't allowed to enter the kitchen, to water plants, to touch the pickle...

“How does the pickle know I'm having my periods?,” jokes Parineeti Chopra, whose monthly cycle won't stop her from dancing, if her role requires it. Given the contradictory inputs, it's probably wise to do what makes you happy. That said, Tashi and Nungshi Malik didn't let their menstrual cycles come in the way of becoming the first twins to summit Mt Everest. Captain Preeti Singh an award-winning pilot has clocked more than 4,000 flying hours and rising, periods notwithstanding. Ishita Malaviya, reportedly the first professional female Indian surfer, won't let her periods keep her out of the water. Thousands of women around India go about their work taking this physiological phenomena in their stride. Do you?

Courtesy: *DNA*